Prophet Margins Week 6

**Opening Prayer**

**Background**

Jonah was a prophet from Israel, but instead of ministering to his people, he was sent to the town of Nineveh. God sends him to Nineveh to preach a message against the people, which Jonah should have appreciated. The main reason he should have embraced this message is that Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, and the king spoken of is likely the emperor of, or at least a high-ranking official in, Assyria. These people, the Ninevites, were the big, bad guys not only to the Israelites but all other areas and people in the Fertile Crescent. However, Jonah goes to the port city of Joppa, gets on a ship, and starts to sail off toward the far end of the Mediterranean Sea to Tarshish, which would have been near today’s Gibraltar. What would make Jonah not go to Nineveh but instead, in ch.1, flee in the opposite direction?

Jonah doesn’t want to go to Nineveh because he doesn’t want God to give the people a chance to repent. The prophet wants the Ninevites to suffer as they have caused and would again cause his people and many others to suffer. He wants God to be wrathful to the Ninevites, and the Lord will do so if Jonah doesn’t go to the city at all.

What happens next is what many know of the prophet Jonah. As he is on the ship to Tarshish, a storm kicks up that threatens to sink the vessel. There is a bit of back and forth among the sailors and Jonah until he finally convinces them that he is at fault for the storm, and the best course of action is to throw him overboard. A large sea creature, a fish or whale, most likely, shallows him up. After three days in its belly, the Lord has mercy on Jonah by having the creature spit him up on land.

**Read Jonah 3:1-5**

**Questions:** What does God tell Jonah to do, and how does he respond? What do we learn about Nineveh in v.3? What does Jonah do when he gets to Nineveh, and how do the people respond?

(God, for a second time, tells Jonah to go to Nineveh to tell the people a message from the Lord. This time Jonah does what God tells him to do and goes to Nineveh. This would have taken some time, as Nineveh wasn’t close to any coast, but inland near the modern-day Iraqi city of Mosul. Situated on the upper Tigris River, it would have been a beautiful town that could sustain a large population. We hear as much in v.3 as we hear that Nineveh would take three days to walk entirely through, and we learn in chapter 4 that the city held some 120,000 people. Note: College Station and Beaumont are around this same size. V.3 also says that Nineveh is great not only in size but also in the eyes of God. God had an eye on the place and was now going to move them into his full view. Jonah is the one to bring the message to Nineveh by telling the Ninevites that within 40 days of their hearing his message, the town would be overthrown. Nineveh was going down, the Lord told them through Jonah. What should amaze us is that the Ninevites listened to this message from God and took action as a result! As they hear that their town is going down, the Ninevites call a fast and put on sackcloth, which is similar to burlap. The Ninevites believe that God is going to make good on the threat and move to a place of repentance through fasting and the wearing of sackcloth. But what does it matter? They are the enemy after all, the big, bad guys. God is going to take care of them no matter what, right? Let’s read on and see what God decides to do.)

**Read Jonah 3:6-10**

**Questions:** Who next hears of God’s word through Jonah, and what does this person do? How does God respond to what the Ninevites do? What does this tell us about God?

(We are told that the king of Nineveh heard of what God spoke through Jonah, that his town was going down. The king does the same as his people by putting on sackcloth, but also adds to this the sitting in ashes. Sackcloth and ashes have been used in many cultures over time to display repentance for their actions. In many Christian traditions, we have continued this practice through the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday as a way to lead into the season of Lent in a state of repentance. The king of Nineveh then encourages all people and animals in the town to fast, and for the people to put on sackcloth to show their repentance to God for the evil that they had done. He also encourages his people to display their repentance through turning from the evil deeds and asking God to forgive them. This, the king hopes, will possibly lead to God turning from destroying Nineveh along with the Ninevites. We then hear of the deep mercy of God in how the Lord responds to the Ninevites' acts of repentance. God sees that the Ninevites are truly sorry for their evil ways and decides not to destroy them along with their town. Jonah later says that this is how God is, though the prophet wasn’t happy about such, by saying, “for you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (4:2b). God is a God of mercy, grace, abounding love, patience, and forgiveness. The story of Jonah is one where not only the Nineveh and the Ninevites are shown mercy, but where the prophet himself is shown mercy. What the prophet failed to understand, however, was that giving mercy is as important as receiving it. We, as followers of Christ, have been given grace and shown mercy by God. May we be like Christ and give others the grace and mercy we have been given. Let us be better than Jonah in this way.)

**Prayer Requests**

