

Who Knows?

Jonah 3:1-10

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 6, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:1-10, NRSV)



God wants repentance. I know some people find that to be a dusty, unpleasant, religious word. Signs like this don’t help. But rightly understood, repentance is something most everybody actually favors. Simple example. If somebody you love is driving through a storm at night on a road leading to a washed out bridge over a raging river, you would do everything you could do to convince that person to turn around and change directions. In a biblical sense, that’s essentially what repentance is, a change in thinking that leads to a change in direction in life. I now understand that driving this direction on this road at this time will lead

to disaster, so I turn my car around and go another way. That’s repentance.

God wants repentance because God loves people. And when people choose the wrong direction in life that leads to harming themselves and others, God wants them to turn around. It’s what you want for people you love. And the fact that God sends Jonah to warn the wicked Ninevites is evidence of his love for them. He could just punish them for their sin, or let them keep driving down a road that led them to destroy themselves. That’s not what God wants. God wants to give them a chance to turn around.

I believe that Jonah finally realizes that there is nothing that he can do to deter God from this mission. He had three days in the belly of the fish to think things over, and it had become clear to him that the Lord was not going to leave him alone. So let’s just go to Nineveh and get it over with. As we see later in the story, his heart is not in it. He’s seen God’s grace, but it hasn’t sunk in deeply enough to lead him to repentance. Nevertheless he goes to Nineveh to tell them to repent, if for no other reason than to get God off his back.

As far as Jonah was concerned, this may have been a suicide mission. Earlier I compared his task to a Jewish rabbi going into the middle of Berlin in 1939 and telling the Nazis that they needed to change their ways. The Assyrian Empire was wicked and brutally violent. This is a nation that slaughtered and enslaved countless peoples. It was renowned for its injustice, imperialism, and oppression of other nations.¹ They most certainly were not friendly towards the Jews. Jonah had already demonstrated that he is willing to end his life. Perhaps his hopelessness is stronger than his fear – suicide by prophesy.

The text describes Nineveh as “exceedingly large, a three days’ walk across.” This certainly is an exaggeration. I could walk from here to San Francisco in three days, and historians and archeologists make clear that Nineveh was nowhere near that large. Still, the point is that it was a big and important city in those days. We learn later that 120,000 people lived there.² That’s a lot of people who are facing destruction. God

¹ Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah* (Penguin Books, 2020), 89.

² Jonah 4:11

wants them to turn around because God wants...repentance. By contrast, Jonah's half-heartedness shows up in the fact that he only walks one day into the city, and offers a sermon which, in the original Hebrew, is only five words. Even those of you who lose patience with long-winded preachers – present company excluded, I'm sure – probably still want more than five words on a Sunday morning! Jonah is offering the bare minimum here. There is no imagination or creativity in his message. He's finishing the assignment given to him, but just barely.

We already know that the last thing Jonah wants is for these people to repent. It's why he refused to go in the first place. It's why we'll find him pouting at the end of the story. Even so, let's give him a little credit. He does not compromise the message God has given to him. It's not simply a message of doom and destruction, but a message calling for repentance. The Ninevites are given 40 days. That's important, because the number 40 in the Bible generally symbolizes a period of testing, trial or probation. God gives Moses 40 years in exile before God calls him to go to Egypt. God gives Israel 40 years in the desert to rethink their decision to mistrust God. Even Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness so that his assurance of God's belovedness could be tested. I think of that verse in Deuteronomy 30:19 when God's people are told, **"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."**³ God wants the Ninevites to repent, and he is giving them 40 days to do so, 40 days to choose life. It's more grace. To his credit, Jonah passes on God's message.

And they do! The odds in Vegas were strongly against this happening, but they actually do repent. Almost immediately! And not just a few of them; this is mass repentance, from the bottom to the top of the social spectrum. Even the animals repent! I would love to see a fasting cow dressed in sackcloth and ashes. How could this happen? Why would this happen? Why wouldn't these people hear the words of this half-hearted prophet and consider him a raving lunatic, a religions madman, and snuff him out? We are not told exactly the reason. Some scholars believe that news of Jonah's experience with the storm and the fish had reached Nineveh. Maybe somebody even saw the fish vomit him up on the beach. If you saw that happen, you might want to then listen to what the guy from the

fish's belly had to say. Others point out that the multicultural nature of the ancient world with all its deep pagan superstitions would have made them ripe to listen to a strange prophet coming at the risk of his own life with such a stern but clear message.⁴ Historians do point out that by this time, the Assyrians had experienced a series of famines, plagues, revolts and eclipses, all of which they would have seen as omens of pending disaster. Somebody like Jonah might actually have been anticipated.

While all this may be true, at the end of the day we have to ultimately attribute their change of heart to the power of God's message, and however it was that God was at work in their hearts beforehand to prepare them to receive it. It clearly wasn't the skill or passion of the messenger that led to their change of heart! Can you see what a burden this lifts off of us as we go into the world ourselves with God's message? I think about the time Jesus points out that the harvest out in the world is ripe, meaning that there are lots of people prepared to hear and receive the message of the gospel, but the thing most lacking is for messengers to go out and bring the message. So he tells his disciples to pray this way: **"Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."**⁵

The Lord doesn't need us to be exceptionally articulate, though we should certainly try our best. The Lord doesn't need us to add or subtract from the message. We dare not! The Lord doesn't need us to convince or convert people. That's not our job. Frankly, the Lord doesn't need us at all. But for whatever reason, he has chosen to communicate his message through us, and so he tells us to go. And apparently even reluctant messengers, as long as they go where they are commanded to go, and speak the message given for them to speak, can be effective, even with the most unlikely audience!⁶

Let me confess something to you. I don't always believe this. Far more often than I'd like to admit, I look at certain people, even whole groups of people, and automatically assume that repentance is not possible. Whether it's a hardened heart, a history of hostility towards the gospel, or a culture that violently rejects Christ himself, there are many times where I simply write people off. But I should know better, because there are far too many examples in scripture and in history to prove me wrong.

³ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁴ *Africa Bible Commentary*, edited by Tokunboh Adeyome (Zondervan, 2006), 1074.

⁵ Matthew 9:38

⁶ I think here of Romans 10:14-15 – **"But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 1And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"**

I heard a report this week of young Christians in South Korea who believe the Lord has called them to sneak across the border into North Korea to share the gospel in what might be the most hostile environment on the planet right now. Many of these young people are never heard from again. And yet they go. I trust it is the Lord who is leading them. It's also clear that they at least believe that it is possible for even the most unlikely suspects to repent. I know from friends in East Africa that in heavily-Muslim parts of the region they are seeing Muslims, and even Imams, come to faith in droves because there are messengers willing to go and call people to repentance. I told you before that the church in Iran is now growing at a rate of over 19% a year, making it the fastest growing church in the world.

I know sometimes we look around at our increasingly-secular culture and can resign ourselves to believe that there are many, many people in our context who will never be open to Jesus. Most of us know people, even in our own families, about whom we've come to the same conclusion. Is it possible we are underestimating the power of the gospel and the ability of God to soften even the hardest heart? People in South Korea and East Africa are not making that mistake.

In the case of Nineveh, it seems clear that the people there did not repent as far as to place their faith in God. There is no evidence that the Ninevites came to a saving, covenant relationship with God. In the passage they use the generic term for God, rather than the name *Yahweh*. There is no evidence that they forsake their idols, or offer sacrifices to God, or circumcise their men as was required. Most commentators agree that Jonah did not convert the Ninevites to faith in God. And history bears this out, as later Nineveh once again became infamous for its evil.

Our hope and prayer, obviously, is that when people repent and turn around in life, they should turn *all the way around* and place their faith in Christ, and Christ alone. That doesn't happen here, and yet there is still some level of repentance that God is after. It's a reminder to us in the church today that, yes, we are called to share the message of the gospel with a lost world which needs Jesus more than they realize, but even when that message is rejected, we are still to speak with a prophetic voice to our society about the evil we recognize which is being embraced. Sometimes the church settles for one or the other. In general – and these are generalizations – more progressive Christians in America go out and call for justice, and more evangelical Christians in America call for repentance to God. The two cannot be separated. And so even when those around us want nothing to do with Jesus, we still

have to call for justice, and to do so warning of God's coming judgment upon those who continue to embrace injustice.

Perhaps the greatest example of this in our context is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who did not make the mistake of separating a call for justice from a warning that God's judgement would come to those who refused to repent. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he responds to critics who question how he can advocate civil disobedience, the breaking of some laws regarding racial segregation. He wrote,

One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all." Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law of the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with moral law.⁷

If our government was building levees out of cardboard to protect our city from flooding, we would speak out because the natural laws of the universe tell us that to do so is foolishness that puts lots of people in danger. Remember, there is a moral law in this universe that is just as unbending as the natural law. And perhaps you can ignore it for a time, but if a society continues to disregard God's moral law, there will also be consequences which do great harm to people. Sometimes we imagine that God's wrath is mostly about thunderbolts hurled from the sky. More often, God's wrath works its way out more slowly through natural consequences. As Old Testament scholar, Alex Motyer put it, "[God] presides over the cause and effect processes he has built into his creation so that they are expressions of his holy rule of the world."⁸ Whether it's ancient Assyria, or modern-day America, if a society continues to thumb its nose at the moral law of God, things will eventually unravel in painful and destructive ways.

There are many people who believe that America as a society is in sharp decline. I'm one of those people. That grieves me, because this is my country that I love, a country which because of its wealth and influence and resources has the potential to do great good in this world. I agree with others who say that the reason for our decline is that we are increasingly becoming a nation that is committed to the rejection of God and his ways. Don't get me wrong, I'm not one to believe that America was ever a Christian nation, or that it ever could become a Christian nation. Nations cannot be

⁷ Cited by Keller, 94-95.

⁸ Cited by Keller, 94.

Christian; they don't have a soul and cannot be saved. Only individual people can become Christians. But nations can seek to honor the ways and laws of God, the justice of God, and it will only go well for nations in the long run who do so.

Part of the job of the church, therefore, is to speak with a prophetic voice to the society in which it finds itself, and to call people, and organizations, even governments to at least this level of repentance before the natural, but God-ordained, consequences come to pass. And we are not just called to cherry-pick areas of injustice to speak against, but to allow God's Word to lead us to speak against all injustice that God finds harmful to people he loves, which means all people.

I find pastor and author Tim Keller helpful here. He points out that since the early church, Christians have almost always been advocates in society for four areas of justice, and in fact globally the vast majority of the church still advocates for these four areas: the flourishing of the poor; racial equity and harmony; the preservation and protection of the unborn; and the sanctity of marriage and sexuality. Now, as soon as I give you that list, I'm sure you see the problem. Much of the American church these days only promotes justice in two of those areas, because far too many Christians these days have allowed their particular political party, rather than the fullness of God's Word, to shape their views of justice. In general, progressive Christians work for justice in the first two areas only, and evangelical Christians work for justice in the last two. How many Christians in American, much less entire congregations, do you know who stand for justice in all the areas in which the church has historically and globally stood for justice?

I understand that these are complicated areas, every one of them, with lots of nuance and need for long, thoughtful, prayerful consideration and conversation. Compassion is required at every turn. My point is that we need to make sure that we as a church are not only speaking for justice in our society, but doing so in ways that are not compromising the fullness of God's justice we see revealed in scripture. After all, what do we really have to say to people that is of any value if what we say is not solidly rooted in the Word of God?

As we bring God's message, of course we should do so always with love. It is love that motivates God to send Jonah to Nineveh, love and grace. It is love that should motivate us to speak to the world around us about justice and repentance. Along with love, we should also have hope. God has moved entire nations and societies to turn around in repentance, sometimes even a repentance that leads to saving faith. We've seen that

happen in our own nation's history with revivals that not only led to countless people coming to faith in Christ, but also led to the massive undoing of unjust policies and practices in our society as a direct result. Why could that not happen today? Why should we not pray for this to happen, to work for it to happen, to even expect it to happen? Does God care less for the people of America today, or for any nation on earth, then he cared for the people of Nineveh in that day?

Last week I told you the story of John Newton, the slave trader who eventually wrote *Amazing Grace*. This week let me tell you the equally-inspiring story of another bold Christian witness, a man named Patrick. Though we refer to him as Saint Patrick, he's an ordinary saint like the rest of us, having never actually been officially canonized by Rome. Furthermore, he's not actually Irish. He's from what is now Dumbarton, Scotland, just northwest of Glasgow. That almost makes him Presbyterian!

In the year 405, Patrick was captured in a raid by Celtic pirates and taken as a slave to what then was the radically pagan island of Ireland. He was only 16 years old. He was a nominal Christian at the time, and had spent his life to that point mostly ignoring the faith of his family. Now a slave in a foreign land, he clung to his faith, spent much of the next six years in prayer, and experienced a genuine deepening of his life with Christ. He also came to know his captors, the Celtic people, and learned their language and culture. Amazingly, he even grew to love them.

One night in a dream, he learned that a ship was ready to take him home again. The next day he escaped to the coast, boarded a ship, and made it back home. Patrick faithfully served the church there for the next 25 years. At the age of 48, he had another dream which once again changed his life. By his account, in the dream an angel read him a letter from his former Irish captors, who cried, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." He interpreted the dream as God's call for him to return voluntarily to the Celtic people of Ireland who had once treated him with such brutality. He did exactly that, and went and boldly called the Irish people to repent and turn to God. The Lord blessed his efforts; the harvest was ripe. It's estimated that Patrick may have baptized tens of thousands of people and planted hundreds of churches. While he certainly was not responsible for converting the whole island, God used him to play a large part in

transforming a place that was once considered by many in the church to be the unreachable ends of the earth.⁹

There is a distressing trend among some Christians these days, especially in our part of the world. We find ourselves surrounded by a culture that has rejected the things of God, God himself. And the response among many has been to flee, often to literally pick up and move our families to places where we hope we can be surrounded by people who see things the way we see things. There are two mistakes we make here. One, do we really think that by moving to (fill in the blank) that we won't just end up facing a different version of godlessness, often dressed up in religious costumes? More importantly, this is clearly not the heart of God, or the heart God wants for his people. We are not called to flee to Tarshish, or get out of Ireland and never look back. Jesus, instead, commanded us to go in to all the world and make disciples of all peoples and all nations.

God loves the people in California and New York, just like he loves the people in Texas and Florida, blue states and red states alike. God loves the people in Russia as much as the people in Ukraine. He loves the people in North Korea just like he loves the people in the United States. And do you know what he wants for these people? He wants repentance. He wants people to turn back to him, to trust him, to pursue and embody justice, to find freedom and joy, to know life abundant and eternal.

When the king of Nineveh commanded the nation he ruled to repent from their evil ways and violence, he admitted that he was not certain that these actions would guarantee they would be spared. He wasn't certain, but he was hopeful. **"Who knows?"**, he asks, **"God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."** I love his question. It's full of hope. Indeed, who knows? Who knows what we may see the Lord do in the lives of the most unlikely people who now are opposed to him and his ways, if we are willing to share in his love for them and then go and tell them that God really does want them to turn back to him so that he might show them his grace.

Amen.

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The Next Step

⁹ *The Life With God Bible*, edited by Richard J. Foster (Harper, 2005), 1321-1322. Also, "The Real Saint Patrick", Ted Olsen, *Christianity Today*,

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Jonah 3:1-10 again. What stands out to you from this account of the repentance of Nineveh?
2. Jonah preaches what might be the shortest sermon in history. And yet the impact is massive. How do we explain this?
3. French philosopher and theologian, Jacques Ellul, writes, "[Jonah] did not become free to select for himself what he would say to men. He did not go to them to tell them about his experiences...He did not decide the content of his preaching...Thus...our witness is fast bound to the word of God. The greatest saint or mystic can say nothing of value unless it is based solely on God's word." Do you agree? How might this help explain the response of the Ninevites to Jonah's message? How might this encourage or warn us?
4. Are there people in this world you would simply like to avoid, particularly when it comes to sharing God's message, maybe because you have convinced yourself that they would never receive it? How do we get to the place where we come to believe that some people are simply beyond saving?
5. Do you believe that the church has a prophetic role to speak to society about justice, warning society that neglecting God's law about such things has dire consequences? If so, how does the church go about doing this?
6. When you hear accounts about South Korean missionaries crossing over into North Korea, or the church in hostile Iran growing like wildfire, or even St. Patrick going back to the people who once enslaved them to share the love of Christ, how does this leave you feeling?
7. In the final verse we read that God changed his mind. What do you make of this? Does God change his mind about things?
8. What is the message the Lord has left you with here? What is your response?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



*What does it mean to repent?
Why does God want people to repent?*