

Sermon Response Guide - November 5, 2023
“A God of Second Chances” Jonah 3:1-10
Pastor Philip Rushton

Sermon Overview:

In our text today, we discover that God extends grace to us and to those we are struggling to love. The chapter begins with Jonah getting a second chance. Jonah 3:1 is almost identical to Jonah 1:1 “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh.”

It is easy to read over this first sentence quickly and get into the main drama of the narrative. However, I think it is important to pause for a moment and notice the grace that is at work in this opening line. Jonah has been rebellious and resistant to God. He refused to listen to God in chapter one and ran in the opposite direction. Yet, God does not give up on Jonah. God still wants to use Jonah and work with him, despite his persistent failures. Perhaps, this point alone is something some of us need to hear again. Our past failure, doubt, rebellion, and fear does not need to define our future. God has not given up on us. He continues to call us to arise and follow him.

God also extends grace to the people of Nineveh. As we noted at the beginning of this series, Nineveh was the arch enemy of the Israelite people. They were known for their brutality and evil. Jonah is understandably angry at these people, and does not want God to give them a second chance. Yet, God has not given up on the Ninevites. He desires that they, too, would turn away from evil and experienced transformation.

Many English translations miss an important detail in verse three. It is often translated that Nineveh was an important city, but in Hebrew it literally says Now, “Nineveh was a great city to Elohim.” God was a great city to God. In other words, Nineveh was important to God. He cared about this city, despite its brutality and evil.

A second insight that is missed in the English language is that one of the words Jonah preaches to the Ninevites has a dual meaning. Jonah proclaims, “forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The word (hapak) can mean destroyed. In the Hebrew bible it is used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, it can also mean changed or transformed. In Psalm 30:11 we read, “You changed (hapak) my wailing into dancing; You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.” Psalm 30 is a prayer of repentance that mirrors the Ninevites repentance in this text. Repentance leads to (hapak) - change or transformation.

Commentators suggest that there is an intentional play on words here. God may have even been tricking Jonah in a way. While Jonah may have been ready and eager to pronounce destruction on his enemies, God had embedded in Jonah’s message the possibility of transformation and hope for the Ninevites.

I wonder if this dual meaning of overturned might reshape our posture toward culture. Do we want to see our enemies, our opponents, and our secular culture defeated or transformed? Do we secretly hope for the downfall of the people we dislike, or do we long for them to thrive? Perhaps we need to discover, again, that the people we dislike are very important to God.

Perhaps we need a reminder that God does not hate the world but so loved the world around us that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life?

This is what God is trying to teach Jonah. And Jonah is still a work in progress. He has had a significant turning point after his descent to the bottom of the sea and God's miraculous rescue. Yet, Jonah is still struggling with God's call. The narrator seems to be showing Jonah's reluctance to fully surrender to God's plans.. In verse 3-4 the passage literally reads: "Now, Nineveh was a great city to Elohim, a walking of three days. And Jonah began to go into the city a walking of one day," Jonah cuts his trip short suggesting that is not fully committed to the mission. This will be confirmed in chapter 4 when Jonah gets mad that God actually forgives the Ninevites.

The good news is that God is able to work despite Jonah's limitations and shortcomings. Even though Jonah cuts his trip and his sermon short, the people hear it and repent. The Ninevites proceed to act like model Israelites. The Ninevites repent of their violence, fast, wear sackcloth and cover themselves in ashes. In his background commentary, Craig Keener, notes that these practices would have been foreign to Assyrian spirituality. They are drawing on Israelite spiritual practices.

There is also a connection here to two other scenes in the Hebrew Bible. The king's phrases, "Who knows? God may yet relent." draws the exact same phrasing used when Moses calls on the Israelites to repent in Exodus 32 after they have built a golden calf. This language also shows up in Jeremiah 26:3 after Jeremiah calls the people to repent.

Tim Mackie, sums up the irony that is being communicated by linking this story to these previous stories. He writes, "In both the stories of Moses and Jeremiah, the prophet plays the role of mediator. The irony is that Jonah, unlike Moses and Jeremiah, has abdicated his role as prophetic mediator, yet unlike the Jerusalemites, the Ninevites do repent!

Here's the point: The book of Jonah is flipping everything upside down. The ones that should repent are slow to repent. The unexpected enemies of God act like the model Israelites. What the author is doing is holding up a mirror to the readers. The message is this: We, the ones who claim to be the religious insiders, are in need of being changed and transformed as well!

The story reminds us that we are important to God. And he persistently pursues us with his grace as well. He offers us another chance to turn and live. I wonder, friends, what change, what transformation does God want to bring about in your life over the next 40 days? Maybe we simply just need to meditate on Jonah's simple sermon - 40 days and the people of Bellingham Covenant Church will be changed!

Questions for Reflection:

1. What stood out to you in the text / sermon today?
2. Where do you long to see change / transformation in your life? In the world?
3. What or who is your Nineveh? Who do you struggle to extend grace to these days?
4. Is there anything in this story that shows us how we might cultivate a different perspective or posture toward our enemies?
5. Have you seen God work through you despite your limitations and shortcomings?