

Hey Jonah... We hear you!

Week 4: Coming down off the throne

Jonah 3, Philippians 2:1-8

Welcome

Good morning, what a pleasure to be back again this week as we walk together through the book of Jonah. I've been challenged the last few weeks, what about you? I hope you see by now that the book of Jonah is deep and sophisticated and not for the faint of heart. But there is truth to uncover here: about God and about ourselves.

Would you stand and pray with me?

(Opening prayer)

Today we are picking up the story in Chapter 3

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.

So this is, like, take two. Jonah, we tried this once and you ran away, but now we are back on land - you smell a bit like old tuna, but at least you are here, so let's try again. So Jonah finally goes and arrives at Nineveh.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Remember, we have seen throughout the first 2 chapters that this author has a tendency to exaggerate things. The storm is HUGE, the fish is HUGE, the sailors are EXTREMELY afraid and here again we find that the city of Nineveh is HUGE. It is so big that it is supposed to take three days just to walk through it.

Now we know Nineveh was nowhere near this big - about 7 miles in diameter - which is pretty big, but not so big that you would need three days to walk through it. But the point of the three days is so that the author can say: "Jonah BEGAN to go into the city, going a day's journey". He only made it partway into the city, and just a few words into his sermon before... what did it say?

And the people of Nineveh believed God Who did they believe? Did you catch that? They believed God, not Jonah. Who did Jonah not even mention in his little speech? Yahweh! But it says they believed God.

They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

This is more exaggeration designed to make us laugh. Here is Jonah, the prophet of Israel - what did it take for him to repent? One huge storm, a bunch of pagan sailors freaking out at him, getting tossed overboard and 3 days in solitary digestion, that's what!

But what does it take for this notorious, evil, city to repent? Five words of one day's bad preaching. "Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overturned." Ok, in English this is about 8 words but in Hebrew this is only 5 words. Basically, one month and you're toast. And amazingly it WORKS? Even the King gets up off of his throne and repents in dust and ashes. Even the animals repent, because the King has THEM put in sackcloth too! (Have you ever tried to put sackcloth on a chicken? BWACK!) And this is crazy; this is so crazy because it is so completely the opposite of what we would expect to happen.

Background on Assyrian empire

Look, without going too far down the historical rabbit trail, the original audience of this story would have totally understood how unlikely an idea this is - for Nineveh, of all places, to repent, to soften its heart so easily. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, and the Assyrian empire was known then and is still studied today for its incredibly efficient, yet brutal, military tactics.

It is interesting that archeologists have uncovered parts of the city (that's how we know how big it was) and they have dug up the palace. And in the entryway to the palace - like the hallways - there are these wall carvings that have survived all these years. And there are these are illustrations of Assyria's battles and what happens to the people they conquered.

There are depictions of people getting impaled on big sticks and set up around cities, there are depictions of the cities under siege and there are Assyrian soldiers preparing to skin their captives alive. It's horrible. And then you remember that this is what the visitors to the palace walk past on the way to an audience with the King.

These archaeological finds are part of a broader historical record showing that Assyria conquered the nations around them using cruel and violent tactics - until most cities would surrender without a fight.

So the idea that THIS empire would repent so quickly is ludicrous. In the ancient world this is equivalent to Hitler and all of the Nazis repenting in the middle of WW2. This is the equivalent of Putin changing his mind about Ukraine right now, and all of Moscow fasting for 40 days in mourning. These things don't just happen, and yet that is what it says happens here in Jonah 3.

Time to "shûb"

Let's look a little closer at the King's decree. He says: *let everyone call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.*"

The word "turn" here is interesting because of how often it is translated as "repent". The Hebrew word is "shûb" (shoov) and it literally means to turn around. Like when my wife and I are traveling somewhere for the first time, and we miss a turn, we have to find a driveway or something to turn around in. (this happened just yesterday in fact!) So we have a running joke that we need to turn around at least once on every major trip we take! That is all it means to "shûb," just turn around.

So, *"Let everyone "shûb" from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may "shûb" and relent and "shûb" from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."*

When God saw what they did, how they "shûbed" from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Notice that the people shûb, they turned around, but who else shûbs? God. God turns away from his wrath; he changes direction and does not bring about the destruction he had threatened. Some translations use "repented" here instead of turned. The people repented and then God repented of his fierce anger. And there was some hand wringing in some of these commentaries I read because it said that God repented - as if God was repenting from sin. But that is just a bad translation right? God is absolutely in the right here. It is his right to judge this evil empire, and it is his right to forgive when they turn from their wicked ways.

I think it is worth remembering that God is the one, the only one, with the right to look at our behavior - the good and the bad - and say THIS is good, and THIS isn't. There are some Christians who are not super

comfortable with a God of judgment. Surely God wouldn't be that mean, they say. God is a god of mercy, not judgment; it isn't loving to send people to hell is it? But of course there are plenty of people who are not super excited about God being a God of mercy either. Like Jonah, they are quick to point at other people's sin and judge them for it.

The truth is that God is a God of judgment and mercy, they go together; they are two sides of the same coin. It is only after God says with authority THIS behavior is wrong - that forgiveness is even possible.

I think the takeaway here was stated most simply by Tim Mackie, he said "there is a God of judgment, and I am not it".

Is that Jonah's perspective? Is Jonah OK with letting God be the judge and with God choosing to forgive the Ninevites? No, he definitely thinks that God should have brought the hammer down rather than relent. Which is odd right? He should be celebrating.

I mean, if the book of Jonah ended right here in chapter 3, is it a good ending? Yes! Jonah's mission is successful. He may have not wanted to go, God had to get him on the right track, but he went and in the end the message is heard, the people repent and God does not destroy the city.

If you are a prophet I have to think this is a good line for your resume. Evil empire, repented after one warning. Check. You can imagine him at the party with the other prophets "oh yeah, you think that's good, I once got a whole city to repent just by saying 5 words. Boom!" But that is not Jonah's response is it?

We will look more into why Jonah is so bitter next week. That's what chapter 4 is all about after all, but for today I'm going to share one more poem by Thomas Carlisle. Talk about a guy who "gets it". He wrote a whole book of poems inspired by the story of Jonah. This one is called: **COUNSELOR TO THE ALMIGHTY**

COUNSELOR TO THE ALMIGHTY

Think twice before You pardon
Men repent
Even in ashes
But repent again
Of their repentance
Take the wiser bias
Of my advice
Confine Your charity
To such good neighbors
As your humble servant

Men repent in dust and ashes, but repent again of their repentance. What a great line. And it's true right? I mean from Jonah's perspective this is what is going to be the end result right? The King of Nineveh, yeah, he got down off of this throne, but what is preventing him from climbing back up on his throne again?

Old habits die hard. We repent, we "shûb" from our sin, God has us going the right way but then, well, maybe just this once... We justify it. God is a God of mercy right? And before we know it we have turned, we have "shûbed" again and we are off on our sinful ways. If you have been walking with Jesus for any length of time you know this pattern right? Repent, do better for a while, fall, and repent again. We never can seem to get it right.

I remember being very troubled by this as a teenager. Every summer, I spent a week at MHC - Memorial Holiness Camp. I remember that in my first year I was so moved by the worship songs and the preaching that

when they had the altar call on the 3rd or 4th night I felt that nudging of the Holy Spirit, and I went to the altar to recommit myself to Christ.

It was an amazing experience and I went home feeling like a new person. And the next summer, come altar call time, I found myself going forward again. And the same thing happened! I felt renewed and full of the Holy Spirit. Year three, same thing.

But by my fourth year, I knew the drill. And I was troubled by it. Why did I feel like I needed to commit myself to Christ again? I already did that didn't I? I had gotten baptized and everything. So I pulled aside Pastor Keith, who was there, and Luke Keefer and I pressed them hard for answers. Why did I keep getting drawn to the altar? Was I not saved all the way already? Am I not repenting right? Did I somehow lose my salvation since last summer? Was I misinterpreting the urge to go forward?

God bless them for sitting with me and talking through this stuff for over an hour as I vented my frustrations. Why is it so hard? I said. I can't live up to God's standard. I am not capable of breaking the cycle of my sin. As Paul says in Roman 7: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing!"

It's pretty sad when you think about it that way. What can we even do? Is there any hope for us if we can't even repent properly?

... Yes, yes of course there is (you should be quicker on the draw here). YES there is hope for us who cannot even repent right. Because there came into this world someone else, Jesus, He also got down off of his throne. He humbled himself and became a servant. He lived the life we can't live and died the death we all deserve. And Jesus rose again conquering death and sin. And so it is through Christ and Christ alone that we are saved, by grace, through faith.

I don't remember everything Keith and Luke said to me that summer, but two things stuck with me: First, was the assurance that Jesus' grace was enough. That no, I was never going to be able to rid myself of sin on my own, that Jesus was in my life, slowly changing me into his likeness, walking with me day by day and slowly refining me.

The second thing that I took away from that conversation was the idea that being a Christian means constantly making the decision to submit to Christ. In every moment of every day, in every decision that we make, we are faced with the option to do things God's way, or to do things our way. Like the king of Nineveh, making Jesus the Lord of our life means getting up off the throne so that he can sit in it. And every day we will be tempted to crawl back onto the throne, to repent of our repentance, and take control of our lives again.

Fifteen years later, I walk the same journey: a long obedience in the right direction. I still fail more often than I like to admit, I still, too often, find myself sitting on the throne of my life. I know I'm not qualified to preach these words to you, but the thing is, neither are you. None of us are. Oh that Jonah would have figured that out, maybe he would have been a little more gracious towards the Ninevites. Maybe he would have seen that they were not so different from each other.

Call to repentance

I guess at this point we are left with the obvious question: Where are you in your walk with Christ? Are you letting Jesus sit in the driver's seat? Or are you hogging the throne?

So today, as we sing our last song, we have an opportunity. We have the opportunity to "shûb" - to turn back from trying to do it all on our own and turn toward God. So whatever posture you need to take as Lori comes forward to play, standing, sitting, kneeling, whatever you feel called to do. I would invite you to sing and pray, or simply listen to the words of the songs.

Maybe you are here today and you have never thought about Jesus this way. Maybe you have never given Jesus control of your life. It is never too late to start. The king of Nineveh was as evil a man as there ever was, but he found forgiveness and the mercy of a loving God. There is nothing we have done so bad that God can't forgive. No matter how far you have run you will never be too far away for God to answer you when you call out.

Or, maybe you have been walking with Jesus for a long time; maybe you have heard this message a thousand times before. But we all need to hear it again and again right? We all are tempted to crawl back onto the throne from time to time. We need to be reminded that we cannot do this alone, that we need to find hope in Christ living in us. We need to practice, daily, letting go of control and letting God show us his good and perfect way.

So wherever you are, the message is the same. We can't do this on our own. We can't fix our broken lives. We can't make up for past mistakes. We can't magically do these three stretches and eat the right kind of yogurt and somehow make our lives perfect. We are broken vessels shuffling along on feet of clay, we are lost sheep caught in the brambles; we are washed up, burnt out, bent and bruised... And Jesus treasures us, he treasures you and wants to lift you up and make you whole.

So as we sing you might feel the Holy Spirit nudging you. And if you do feel that nudging then I invite you to pray along with our closing song. Let the lyrics be your prayer today. And if you need to pray or talk about it with someone else; then I would invite you up to the prayer corner after the service. There will be one or more of the deacons waiting to pray with you and help you take whatever the next step is in your walk with Christ.

Benediction

Go in the peace and mercy of Jesus Christ, our Savior, Redeemer and King.