

I love the book of Jonah. Don't you? Jonah's story is a classic, perhaps it's one of the first stories you learned in Sunday School. A man tries to run away from God, but instead gets swallowed up by a large fish and spat up on dry land to preach to a foreign land.

It's a short book, only four chapters, and today, although we only read chapter 3 in church, we're going to be looking at and discussing the whole account. So our question for this morning is: What does the book of Jonah teach us?

The very first words of the book of Jonah read: **“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.’”** Fast forward: Jonah tries to run away from God by going on a ship the opposite direction of Nineveh, he gets thrown off the boat, swallowed by a fish, spends three days there, he gets spat up upon dry land, then we read this, chapter 3, verses 1–2, the beginning of our reading for today: **“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.’”**

Two times the Lord says to Jonah, go and preach to Nineveh. And do what? Give them a thumbs up? Say, “We love you, you're very special?” No! The Lord says to Jonah, “Call out against Nineveh, for their evil has come up before me.” Thus, 3. we think the book is about how bad Nineveh is.

You need to understand a little about Nineveh. Nineveh was the capitol of Israel's enemy, Assyria. In fact, later on in Israel's history—less than a century later—Assyria would invade and destroy them.

Is this a story about how bad Nineveh is? No wonder Jonah didn't want to preach to those ingrates. If you were told to preach to your worst enemies, wouldn't you get on a boat in the opposite direction? Did you ever hear the story of the messenger who had bad news? You didn't? I didn't either because he got shot. Jonah was worried that same fate might befall him.

The question this morning is, who is your Nineveh? Who is so contemptible that he doesn't even deserve to be told he's trapped in sin, let alone to know the good news of the Gospel? Who is so beneath you that for you to risk something to confront him would be beyond consideration?

Is it the rioters, the insurrectionists, and fill in whatever other pejorative you like who invade the Capitol, attack police officers, and set buildings on fire? Is it the people who say that life in the womb is a choice rather than a child? Is it the lady next door who seems quite content playing house with her boyfriend claiming that marriage is just a piece of paper? Is it the guy down the road from you who is doing quite well for himself financially yet brags about cheating on his taxes? Is it the liars who seem all too eager to fill our television sets and governmental

offices? Is it the people who don't take COVID seriously enough? Is it the people who take COVID too seriously? Who is your Nineveh?

Is the book of Jonah all about how bad Nineveh is? Yes. There's no way getting around it, that's part of it, right? If Nineveh was doing great and had no issues, the Lord wouldn't have needed to call Jonah to their city.

The Lord says, “... **I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways...**” The Lord wants to call sinners to repentance, and the first part of that is to acknowledge sin for what it is, something that is horrible and leads to death.

So it is good, right, and salutary that we do indeed call the Ninevehs in our life to repentance. If someone truly is living in sin, it does them no good for us to remain quiet, even if the truth might hurt. And we see that the city of Nineveh does repent from the greatest to the least and the Lord does indeed have mercy and turn away from His disaster. The book is about how bad Nineveh is, but it is also about how Nineveh does end up turning from its sin!

Where we run into problems though is our contempt for Nineveh. Contempt is when you think someone is beneath your consideration. Contempt is where you find that that someone is not a someone, practically not even a person! As we look at the book of Jonah, we realize that the prophet has this problem! 2. We realize the book is about how bad Jonah is!

In Sunday school, we're used to recognizing Jonah as the hero of this story, but he's really the worst. He runs away from God's call. He's sleeping and idle when the waves are about to sink the boat. When Jonah tells the pagan sailors what he did—running away from the Lord—even they know you're not supposed to do such a thing. The sailors make Jonah look bad, because by the end of chapter 1, they're the ones rejoicing to the Lord God and sacrificing to Him, even though none of them were faithful Israelites.

When Jonah finally does his job and preaches to the people of Nineveh and the Lord does relent of the disaster He promised, Jonah is upset. Jonah 4 verse 1 reads, “**But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.**” Jonah then explains he's upset because he knew that God was gracious and would pardon them. Without saying it exactly this way, Jonah tells the Lord that he fled because he knew that the people of Nineveh would repent! That is certainly the picture of contempt! To Jonah, the people of Nineveh weren't worth saving!

Again, the quote from Ezekiel, the Lord says, “**I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways...**” Yet that's not where the verse ends. The Lord continues, “...**for why will you die, O house of Israel?**” The audience of the Lord's admonition is not aimed at Nineveh or Israel's next door neighbors, but at Israel itself. Repentance begins at home.

As we revisit this book of Jonah, the real book of Jonah, not just the one from children's Bibles and Sunday School, we soon realize that Jonah is the one who is in most need of repentance. Jonah, who shows contempt and disgust for the pagan sailors, the Ninevites, and arguably even God Himself, is the one who needs the attitude adjustment.

As we look at Jonah we realize we're looking in the mirror, we realize we're not so great. We're the ones in need of an attitude adjustment. We could maybe use a few days in the belly of a whale to knock us down a few pegs. We are certainly called to speak out against sin, but we do so as fellow sinners, not as kings and queens sitting on lofty thrones.

So what is the book of Jonah about? It is about how bad Nineveh is? In part, yes. Is it about how bad Jonah is, yes, to be certain. However, we soon realize, 1. The book is about the Lord who loves both and wants all to repent.

In Jonah chapter 4, verse 2, Jonah says to the Lord, **“And he prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.’”** Jonah gives us the answer to what kind of God is behind the book of Jonah.

We have a God who doesn't want the sinner to die in his or her sin. God doesn't want the people of Israel to die in their sin. God doesn't want the people of Nineveh to die in their sin. He wants nobody to die in sin. If anyone could rightfully look at someone with contempt, it would be almighty and perfect Lord. Yet He looks at nobody with contempt but loves all.

God so loved Nineveh that He sent Jonah kicking and screaming to preach to them a message of repentance. God so loved Israel that He sent prophet after prophet to tell them to turn from sin and live. **“‘God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.’”** Our Heavenly Father sent His Son Jesus to us that we may live.

Instead of showing sinful humanity contempt, Jesus shows solidarity with us. He goes down with us into the muck. He associates with the deplorables of his day: tax collectors, prostitutes, and even lowly fishermen. He walks alongside the lepers and the outcast.

To be certain, Jesus doesn't give them a thumbs up and say you're perfect just the way you are. Rather, He pulls them from their lowly state and redeems them. To the adulterous He says, “Go and sin no more.” To the tax collectors, Jesus rejoices when they promise to return what they've stolen. He heals the lepers and he makes the fishers into fishers of men.

And so too, Jesus has come to this Earth to redeem you, O haughty prophet Jonah. He has come to save you, O sinful citizen of Nineveh. He has come down to

this Earth to meet you where you are, and to raise you up through the forgiveness of sins, leaving your former self behind.

Your sins of pride, your sins of contempt for others, your deepest, darkest secrets have been heaped onto the cross. The cross levels the playing field as sinners of all stripes are called to gather there and worship their Lord and king. Rioters, insurrectionists, adulterers, thieves, and liars all gather together at the foot of the cross to turn from their sins and live. The cross is where God show Himself to be “...**a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.**”

The only sign Jesus gave the people of that day was the sign of Jonah, namely, that just as Jonah was in the belly of a whale for three days, so too was Jesus in the belly of the earth for three days. On the third day the earth spat Him out because death could not hold Him.

Just as Jesus rose from the dead, we too as Christians rise from our former selves which identify with sin and pride, and we call out to others to join us. Just as Jonah called out to Nineveh, we can call out to others to turn from sin. Not as those looking down our noses at others, but as fellow beggars telling others where to find bread. **THE STORY OF JONAH TEACHES US GOD'S MERCY IS FOR EVERYONE—EVEN JONAH.** There's hope for us yet, even us sinner-saints. Amen.