

Mercies Higher Calling

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 09/20/20
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The Book of Jonah is a strange, even funny story. Some commentators have called the Book of Jonah a kind of extended joke. Out of the blue, Jonah is commanded by God to become a missionary to the worst, most-hated people in the world, at least as far as Israel is concerned: the Ninevites.

But Jonah runs in the opposite direction. He would rather die than go talk to the Ninevites about God. So God sends a fish to swallow Jonah up and then spit him out after three days and nights. Evidently, God was serious when God commanded Jonah, "Go! Preach to Nineveh!"

So Jonah reluctantly gives up and gives in to God. He goes to Nineveh, but he goes there with a lousy attitude and preaches the shortest and worst sermon in history – a one-sentence threat saying that in 40 days Nineveh will be history.

I can almost hear Jonah say to God, "There! I've preached to these disgusting Ninevites!"

And wonder of wonders, in response to the worst sermon by the most reluctant of preachers, the Ninevites repent. The whole city – even the cattle – repent, and God also repents of the threatened judgment.

Israel has been called a "light to the nations." But after years of humiliating defeat at the hands of the Assyrians (Nineveh was the capital of Assyria), what Jew in the world would want to be part of God's reaching out to the Ninevites?

Can you relate to this ancient story? Have you ever brought God's word and hope and healing to someone you despised?

Jesus told us to forgive our enemies. That is a command that is very much at odds with the ways of the world; it is very different from our own human inclinations. Sometimes the hardest step down a path of forgiveness is simply to talk to our enemies.

"They haven't spoken to each other for years," is what one often hears about the conversation between enemies. Yet that is exactly what God told Jonah to do.

There is not a corner of this earth that has not been penetrated by the disciples of Jesus Christ who obeyed the same command that God gave to Jonah: "Go!" And usually when that command came to them the voice of God commanded them to go places few of them naturally wanted to go.

Think of poor Rev. Salmon Stebbins who on November 28, 1837 (11 years before statehood) preached the first sermon in the heathen place – not Nineveh – but Madison, Wisconsin. It was at a guest house near the corner of State and Mifflin Streets.

Or how about Isaac Smith who in 1846 applied at Fort Winnebago (now Portage, WI) for permission to hold religious services. The county history said he got little encouragement. But he and Captain Low got the use of the dining room of the Franklin House for worship.

Do you notice a trend here?

With whom does God want you to strike up a conversation in God's name?

Where is the Nineveh that our church is neglecting? In what ways have we limited the wideness of God's reign? Who have we left out from our table when we eat and drink in Jesus' name?

Those are a few of the questions raised by this story of Jonah, is, as it turns out, also a story about us. And I'm not sure whether to laugh or to cry.

Jonah reminds us that "wickedness" springs not from the fact that you are not like me, or "they" are not like "us." Wickedness happens when people are not like God, whether those people in question happen to be Ninevites, the 1%, the teeming masses, Democrats, Republicans, or any one of us.

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God's point is that the Kingdom must grow, and everybody is invited. Even the obnoxious neighbor who yells at our dog. Even the coworker who takes credit for someone else's effort. Even the Christian who is so self-righteous.

Even those nasty Ninevites.

Even us.

God's plan is that everyone will be saved by turning away from wickedness and toward the only God who can free a guy from the belly of a fish; the only God who can transform an entire city of heathens; the only God who can melt hateful hearts.

God persists as the only one who can change us too.