

Jonah 3 Sermon for 11am

As we continue our adventures with Jonah, today we go from fish-vomit-covered Jonah lying on a beach to Jonah announcing the destruction of a great city, the city's complete turn-around, and then God's change of heart.

The first thing that happens is that God speaks again to Jonah. Despite all that has happened, despite all Jonah's disobedience and running away, God still plans on using Jonah to bring his message to Nineveh. For me, this is an amazing and reassuring thing. We all have God-given callings on our lives. Perhaps some of us worry that since we've run away, or done things we aren't proud of, that we are somehow damaged goods. We feel like we're not good enough for God to use. Maybe it isn't necessarily for any particular reason, we just feel like we aren't a good enough Christian for God to use and so we leave it to others to listen to what God wants. Jonah's story tells us that no-one is outside God's calling and no amount of disobedience or running away can prevent God from using us if he chooses.

Jonah responds to God by getting up and heading to Nineveh. For those of you who heard me preach on Jonah 1, you'll note the upward movement as God calls and Jonah responds. You'll also note the return of the word "great" which is used all through the story to describe things that ultimately fall under God's authority - in this case, Nineveh itself. The point here is that God is sovereign over everything in this story and it's a theme that keeps coming up today.

We've had a great city, a great storm, a great fish, and now there is the great city again. This sovereignty, hinted at by these "greats" is underpinned today by the statement by the Ninevite King, similar to the sailors in chapter 1: "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind". The change of heart by Nineveh isn't a transaction whereby the people earn God's favour, forcing God to relent by being farcically obedient. Instead, they have a huge fast and humble themselves by wearing sackcloth and ashes, and even then, leave it to God to decide what to do. God is not compelled, but instead sees what they do and freely changes his mind. All through the story we have God acting independent and with ultimate authority. Humanity cannot compel, purchase, or require God's mercy, but God gives of his own free will.

Like I said last week, this affects how we see prayer – not as a shopping list, or an instruction to God, but as our pleas to a sovereign God.

The behaviour of the people and leaders of Nineveh is dramatic to the point of almost comic. Even the animals are involved. This is no false act to placate God, but a real and complete surrender to their predicament. It isn't a political strategy or a gambit to gain advantage. It is complete submission to God.

We often talk of repentance in Church, which means a complete turnaround of life to orient ourselves to God rather than to ourselves. In Nineveh, we see what humility and surrender to God can look like. There was no-one too proud to humble themselves. There was no-one too important to recognise that God was in control. Nowhere in the story does it concentrate on what we normally and mistakenly round churches think of as repentance – the stopping of the odd particular sin here and there – but instead there is a complete submission and throwing themselves at God's mercy. Rather than getting obsessed with particular issues or sins, repentance is acknowledging God as master of our whole lives and is therefore getting out of the driving seat. This happened dramatically in Nineveh.

Another thing to note in the story is Jonah's preaching. Perhaps the shortest message in history! It wasn't very good by any measure I've ever heard. It was pure fire and brimstone. It didn't tell anyone about God even! There was no hint on how to respond. Jonah clearly didn't want Nineveh to be saved. He was doing his job and no more. He didn't go the whole way to the middle of the city. He didn't care if anyone heard or understood. He didn't practice any good rhetoric or argument. He seems to do the very minimum to get by.

Here we have Jonah disliking the enemies of Israel, and yet God using his stubbornly reluctant words anyway. This is great news for us. Often we feel like we can't tell our friends about God or invite them to church because we don't know the words or we're scared that we won't know what to say or that they might think we are foolish. God can use even the worst sermons, the most reluctant and scared prophets, and can even soften the hardest of people. Our job is just to say what we can, and trust God for the rest – what a relief!

So already, we have covered about 4 sermons-worth of stuff. But the story of Jonah is a prophetic book, and therefore it exists to tell us more about the God we serve. So, what does chapter 3 tell us about God?

This chapter continues to tell us that God loves his enemies enough to save them. In chapter 1 we have God seeing how bad Nineveh had become and sending Jonah to sort them out. In chapter 3, we have God persisting in this strategy, despite Jonah's conviction that these enemies of Israel are bad beyond saving. We'll see that this continues into the final chapter too. God keeps sending Jonah to Nineveh. He keeps wanting them to get his message. Then when they receive his message and respond, God has great mercy on them. God could have just destroyed them without warning, but instead, gives them opportunity to repent and then acts in mercy. God loves his enemies enough to save them.

Then we also see that God is affected by human actions. God isn't an aloof and absent deity who just set the world moving and then lets it go. Instead God watches and acts. He even changes his mind based on the actions of human beings. This is hugely encouraging to us as we pray. Whilst we remember God is sovereign and cannot be compelled, we can also be assured that he listens and responds. God isn't detached. God is flexible and responsive.

Thirdly, we see that God uses human weakness despite reluctance and disobedience. This tells us that God is committed to his creation and to partnering with his people even through their imperfections. God could have just announced his judgement in giant letters in the Nineveh skyline, but instead went to huge lengths to send a reluctant prophet. In this way he taught Nineveh, but also taught Israel too. But he didn't need to use Jonah to do either of these things. God seems to enjoy our participation in his works, despite all the extra hassle that comes his way as a result. It's like doing DIY jobs with children – it's so much quicker, easier and less frustrating to do them without the kids, but by including the children, they learn and family bonds are strengthened. It's the same with God.

So we have a God who is persistent in his love for his enemies and his commitment to save them; a God who is not aloof but engaged with humanity; and a God who encourages the participation of his people in his mission rather than running rough-shod over the whole of human dignity.

As we close, I just want to note that these are exactly the characteristics of God we see in Jesus. God is so persistent in wanting to save from judgement all those who do not know him, or who actively hate him, that he sent his own son, Jesus, to die to save his enemies. God persisted in his

love for each one of us here, so much, that Jesus died for you and for me. Like the Ninevites, our response is to humbly accept his sovereignty over us and follow Jesus.

God is so engaged with human actions that he sent Jesus to live among us. Our God doesn't just look down from on high, but instead shared the sand and the dirt with his people. He shared the joy and pain, the hunger, the thirst, the emotional highs and lows. In Jesus, God shows his commitment to engaging with the people he created.

Then in the stories of Jesus and his disciples, we have God committed to using human frailty and imperfection, despite objection, disobedience, betrayal, and stupidity. God still calls each one of us to follow Jesus, despite our imperfections, and to answer God's call upon our lives, even though we aren't worthy or good enough. We follow Jesus because, just like Nineveh, we have received God's mercy by Jesus's death, and so we orientate our lives in thankfulness. We follow Jesus, not to earn God's pleasure, but because it is just the obvious thing to do in response to God's love for us! Amen.