

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
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JANUARY 29, 2012

SERMON: WHEN VILLIANS CONVERT

TEXT: JONAH 3: 1-5

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.”

How do you feel about horrific killers, who all of a sudden find Jesus while on death row, and stand up in front of reporters and television cameras professing that they have repented and God has forgiven them and that when they die they are going to go to a “better place” - Heaven?

Have you ever wanted the wicked to suffer for the wickedness they did? For the cruel, the selfish, the heartless to get their just rewards? For God’s punishment to fall from the skies like a North Texas Belly Washer?

Well then, you should understand Jonah!

Jonah was a prophet of God, whose job was to deliver the Word of God as directed by God. I really don’t know how good a prophet Jonah was because we only have this one story about Jonah

The thing about that story is that we only teach and remember the wrong part of it. We know all about the whale but nothing about Nineveh.

Let’s think about the larger picture. God came to Jonah with a mission.

Remember the “Mission Impossible” TV shows and movies. They all started with the team leader receiving his assignment. Let me paraphrase: "Good morning, Jonah. Your mission, should you decide to accept it is to preach to the people of Nineveh and

bring them to true repent before God. If you are caught or killed the Bible won't record your failure. This tape will self-destruct in five seconds. Good luck, Jonah."

Just one thing. There was no "should you decide to accept it." It was a command. Go! Preach! Convert!

The assignment shocked, horrified and offended Jonah. The people of Nineveh were his special enemies.

That made me wonder, for Dallas Cowboy fans, who is worse: the Philadelphia Eagles or the New York Giants? I know that's tough but, when those two play each other - who should a true cowboy fan want to lose the most? [Ask for a show of hands???

For Jonah there was no question! Nineveh was the enemy! Jonah wanted them to die, their city to be ruined, and their kingdom destroyed. There was no forgiveness in Jonah's heart for Nineveh - it was cold and hard.

Why?

Well, I don't want to bore you if you already know all this. If you do then I guess you can play Angry Birds on your telephone until the history lesson is over.

Nineveh was the capitol of the Assyrian Empire. Nineveh was founded about 6000 B.C. It was located at the confluence of the Tigris and Khosr Rivers near modern day Mosul in Iraq. The capitol was surrounded by a double wall about a mile buy 2 1/2 miles long. There is evidence that the famed "Hanging Gardens of Babylon" were actually constructed in Nineveh under Assyrian Emperor Sennacherib.

Assyria was an empire with sights on expansion and international commerce. They found themselves in direct competition with Egypt. The meeting place of their empires was a line that flowed back and forth across Israel with the shifting tides of global power. This meant that Assyria and Egypt were constantly fighting each other in the general area of Israel and constantly making alliances with smaller nations like Israel, who often came out looser no matter which empire was the winner.

Assyria for many years held Israel as a vassal state, imposing high taxes and importing Assyrian deities into Israel. Israel's greatest memory of Assyria is that Assyria defeated the 10 Northern Tribes of Israel and carted them off into bondage in Assyria and none of them ever came back.

History lesson over. Take a quick peek at the people around you. Anyone sleeping?

So, Jonah had reasons for his hatred of Nineveh and all of Assyria!

So, what was Jonah to do? God had commanded him to go and save the Ninevites! Well, he could have said “No” but maybe God would have just sent another who would have succeeded. Therefore, Jonah decided to do something bold, risky, and dangerous. He decided to actively frustrate God’s plan!

He said “yes” to God but immediately ran as fast and as far as he could in the opposite direction, rationalizing that if he never got to Nineveh then the Ninevites couldn’t repent and God would eventually punish them for their crimes against Israel.

He got on a ship and hid from God below deck and hoped that God wouldn’t notice what he was doing. Silly man!! “Trixs are for kids” and delusions are for idiots.

That’s when the part of the story you all know takes place. In a raging storm a mighty fish swallow’s Jonah whole. Jonah sat in the fish’s belly for three days while God worked on Jonah to repent of his sin. Finally God outlasted Jonah’s hard headedness.

Do you know anyone that hard-headed? If you’re married to them don’t smile! Don’t do it! They are watching!!

Then the fish spit Jonah out onto the beach. Yuck! I imagine he needed a bath, clean clothes, and to brush his teeth!

I’m glad that you know that fish story otherwise this sermon would have been 10 minutes longer!!

Anyway, he found himself standing right on the main road to Nineveh. Funny how things like that just happen! After an uneventful trip he arrived at the mighty city of Nineveh.

Jonah walked into the city and went to it’s very heart, stood on palace steps and addressed whoever just happened to be there. In his mightiest prophecy voice announced: [speak through clenched teeth] “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Shhh! Don’t tell anyone!) And then he turned on his heel, said not another word, and walked out of the city. Smiling through those clenched teeth.

He had fulfilled his duty but he had done the absolute minimum. Again, he thought he had outsmarted God!

So he made camp on a hill across from the city and settled in to wait for Nineveh's eventual destruction. After all, who in their right mind would be converted by such a half-hearted effort?

Speaking of half-hearted efforts - that reminds me of people who love God - just not enough to come to church or read the Bible or follow Jesus' teachings or pray.

Then something strange happened. God happened. God took what Jonah had said, as wimpy as it has been, and put the power of the Lord behind it. And people started to talk about it. And slowly but surely they began to fear God's prophecy. That fear was in its way a sign of respect. From the top of the gold gilded palace to the seediest back alley full of trash, graffiti, hookers, drug dealers, and corpses, people talked about God's judgment. They put on sack cloth and ashes and they repented. Their hearts were changed.

Jonah, across the way, fortunately out of ear shot, was mouthing things that we are glad we can't lip-read and I sure can't repeat from the pulpit. But we know what he was expressing - disappointment and anger. God had won!

Jonah wanted justice. He wanted revenge. He wanted God to smite the enemies who had persecuted his people.

The only problem was that God did not see enemies. God saw children. Misguided, badly behaving, ill-tempered, sinful, faithless, cruel, self-serving...children. God's children. And God was not rushing to smite God's children - not when they might still repent and their hearts be changed.

Jonah wanted God to go all Sodom and Gomorrah on Nineveh. But Jonah had forgotten that God had promised Lot to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if only 10 good people could be found. They had a chance! And God gave that last chance to the Ninevites!

Jonah couldn't see it. Couldn't see beyond what they deserved.

I'm not naïve. I'm sure they did deserve a good smiting. Someone said that you have to break some eggs to make an empire. Well, I'm sure they broke a bunch! If they had had a War Crimes Tribunal back then I'm sure they would have been under investigation and probably convicted of something.

But God saw them as prodigal sons and daughters and God wanted them to come back. God wanted to give them one more chance.

Does that make God a soft-hearted dummy? Some might think so. But the very God who gave his only Son to die on a cross for our sins that we might we might obtain a place in the Kingdom of Heaven – consistently offers mercy and grace to sinners – and not just to casual sinners who only hurt themselves, or to little bitty sinners who only steal loaves of bread because they are hungry.

Mercy and grace are for all who call on the name of the Lord and ask. Just ask!

But what about us? What do we do when people whom we despise answer God's call to repent and come back to God? Good Gosh – what do we do when ex-prostitutes, ex-cons, disgraced politicians, and war criminals come sit down on our pew?

In some senses this is very much a Prodigal Son story and we are the Elder Brothers who will either welcome the prodigals home or reject them and the God who finds a way to forgive the repentant sinners.

Good Christians, elder brothers and sisters of the faith, what shall we do when repentant sinners come to God's house? Should we build a moat? Should we hire armed guards? Should we do criminal background checks and blood tests?

Or should we rejoice and be glad that the prodigals have repented and come back to God, who loves them like a Father?

What will YOU do?