

The Book of Jonah
Lessons from a Runaway #3
Jonah Chapters 3-4

(Jonah, carrying a backpack and talking to himself rather than to the congregation places items on the table).

Let's see. Do I have all I need? Sunglasses. Sunscreen - for those oppressively hot, sunny days in Nineveh. Extra water - for the journey through the desert. Tim Horton's mug - in case there's a "Timmies" along the way. Oh yes, and a bottle of Coca Cola - this is a difficult assignment and "Things go better with Coca Cola".

(Seeing the congregation for the first time)

Sorry, I didn't see you there. It's me again, Jonah, the runaway prophet. But, as I've told you before. You can call me Joe. I'm just getting ready for my journey.

If you've been here the last couple of weeks you know my story. I am a prophet. That means God tells me where to go, and what to say to people. I'm like an ambassador for God. So one day God tells me to go to Nineveh. I'm on my way there right now.

(Puts things back in his backpack and puts it on)

Nineveh was a huge city, located in modern day Iraq, and it was the capital of the mighty Assyrian empire. One day, God told me to go there and to tell its people to turn to him or they were doomed! Doomed, doomed I say! (I've always wanted to say that in church!)

I didn't think going there with that kind of message was a good idea. I was pretty sure that the moment I started telling them to "Repent" that they would find some unpleasant way to torture me to death!

So I caught a ship that was going in the opposite direction. But God sent the worst storm of the 8th century Before Christ. The ship I was on almost sank! The crew discovered that I was running away from God so they threw me overboard, and the storm ceased. That's when I got swallowed by a gigantic sea creature and spent three days in its belly coming to my senses. Yes, that's why I smell a little "fishy"

I told God how sorry I was. I prayed for a second chance. I even said that if I ever got out of this whale of a situation I would obey Him and go to Nineveh! Next thing I knew, I was flying through the air and eating sand on a beach. So it's off to Nineveh I go!

(Starts walking out of the worship area)

Hymn #307 "God of the Sparrow" vs.1-2, 4-6

(Jonah re-enters worship area)

It's always nice to have music when you're walking! Thanks for singing. I left my iPod at home! So here I am in Nineveh. I'm still really nervous about being here. I still think coming here is a death sentence. Too bad life insurance hadn't been invented yet so my family could benefit from my death.

Wow! This is huge city. I stopped in at the Tourist Information Booth for a map and they told me that it takes three days just to walk all around it! Did you know that your archaeologists have discovered that the walled part of the city – the downtown core – had a circumference of 8 miles, and when you add in Greater Nineveh, it had a circumference of 60 miles! And you think Newmarket is getting too big!

I spent the first day taking in the sights, and what sights they were. I had never seen such wickedness. If evil was an Olympic sport these Ninevites would have won the gold medal every time. I saw Temples to all kinds of false gods. Life was so cheap, that people were murdered in broad daylight and no-one seemed to care. Gangs roamed the streets, picking on whoever they wanted. The rich ate well, while the poor begged on the streets, or died of hunger. Thieves were everywhere. One of them even stole my bottle of Coca Cola. Now that's not a good omen. If things go better with Coca Cola, how badly do they go without it! I didn't want to find out!

I saw enough wickedness in Nineveh in one day to last me a lifetime. I now knew exactly why God had sent a prophet here. So I went to the city square, stood on a box I found so people could see me, took a deep breath and started to warn people:

"Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed"

I told them how God hated sin. I smiled a little when I got to the part that they were all going to roast in the fiery furnace! After all these Ninevites were the cruel enemies of my people. I had so much fun watching them squirm. I still thought they would kill me but I didn't care. At least I'll go out with a prophetic bang.

But something went wrong – or right – depending on your perspective. Soon people started to dress in sackcloth. Sackcloth was a rough, dark coloured

cloth made from goat or camel hair. In my day, you only wore it to show that you were sorry for your sins. No, I am certain you can't get sackcloth in the clothing section in Walmart! I don't know where these Ninevites found all the sackcloth, but it quickly became a fashion trend. Everyone was wearing it, all the way from the lowliest beggar to the King of Assyria.

The King even ordered that all the animals wear it. You should have seen them running around trying to catch one of their goats or cows to put the sackcloth on them! Best entertainment in town.

Of course, this sackcloth thing was no laughing matter. I was getting worried. The Ninevites were actually repenting. And I knew what God was thinking – forgiveness. Let me tell you, I was not a happy prophet. My plan had been to preach God's message, and then head for the hills and find a place to camp so I could see God reign down fire on Nineveh and destroy it and its wicked people forever.

But then the King of Assyria wrecked my plan. He told the whole population to pray to the Lord with all their heart. He told them to stop being cruel and sinful. To start loving God and loving one another. Soon things started to change. The people began to care for one another. Justice was restored. The murder rate dropped dramatically. Thieves found real jobs and moved into government service. The temples and altars to the false gods were destroyed.

And, yes, you got it. God changed his mind about destroying Nineveh. I just knew that's what he'd do, and I was really upset with him. I wanted the "*fire from the sky*" option to be put back on the table. But God had made up his mind. He'd decided to be merciful.

I've thought a lot about my time in Nineveh and I think I learned four important lessons. Let me share them with you.

First, I learned that in every life situation we have a choice of whose "will" we will bow to. Even Jesus, you'll remember, faced that choice. What to do when faced with the cross? His answer, '*Not my will, but yours be done*'

Now that's a hard place to be. No doubt about it. Because GOD might not want what YOU want. He might want you to go to Nineveh! Forgive your neighbour who gossiped about you. Admit you made a mistake and then lied about it. Tell your spouse you are sorry for getting angry at them. God's will verses our will. But '*Not my will, but yours be done*'. Make no mistake, it takes real faith to surrender to God like that, but that's the kind of faith that is life changing and world transforming.

Second, remember that all sin will one day be punished. God never pretends that he doesn't hate sin. He does. He tells us that sin is a death sentence. A one way ticket to the fiery furnace.

Yet, I couldn't forgive the Ninevites, even if God could. But I know that Jesus told you something about this pretty plainly. *"If you do not forgive others their sins against you, God won't forgive you for your sins against others! ... For the measure you use, will be measured to you.* Now that raises the stakes, doesn't it?

Third. I learned that true repentance is more than saying "I'm sorry". Faith without action is a useless thing. If you are truly sorry for something you will do your best to make it right. If you have stolen, you will pay back the money, however long it takes you. If you have been unfaithful in your marriage you will end that relationship and try to be reconciled to your spouse. If you have hurt someone, you will do all you can to restore that relationship.

Is all that easy? Of course not. Doing God's will is hard because sin keeps us self centered. It wasn't easy for the Ninevites either. But it is necessary. It is necessary for us to repent of our sins. Repent literally means to turn around and walk in the opposite direction.

Fourth, I learned that God will forgive our sins when we do repent. As John would write centuries after my lifetime in one of his letters to the early Church.

If we say we have not sinned, we are fooling ourselves, and the truth isn't in our hearts. But if we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away.

I found God's mercy in the belly of a sea creature. The Ninevites found it in the midst of a great city. A thief found it hanging on a cross next to Jesus. A man named Saul found it on the road to Damascus. Have you found it yet? Trust me. If God could forgive the Ninevites, he can forgive you! The cross of Jesus is his guarantee of that.

OK. I have to sit down for a while and put up my feet. All that walking around Nineveh has tired out an old guy like me. Why don't you sing something and I'll catch a few zzzz's. Then I'll tell you how my story ended. It's probably not the way you were expecting.

(Jonah sits down and falls asleep)

Hymn #682 "Just as I am" Vs 1,3,4 & 6)

(As the hymn ends, Jonah jumps up as if woken suddenly by a loud noise)

What was that horrible noise? Oh it was just your singing!!! Yes, I am jumpy. But I am also angry and upset. Oh, not with you. Your singing wasn't that bad!!! No, I'm mad at God for changing his mind and forgiving the Ninevites. I am so ticked off with him.

After all, I've been thrown into the sea by a bunch of angry sailors, been imprisoned in the belly of a whale for three days, I still smell like fish, I spent three days in that sea- creature's stomach pouring my heart out in prayer, and yes, like the Proclaimers, I've walked 500 miles but to Nineveh not Leith outside Edinburgh. And now God isn't going to give me the pleasure of seeing these Ninevites destroyed. I've earned the right to be very angry!!

How can I go back home and tell my people – God's people – that I have been so successful as a prophet that the Ninevites – their sworn enemies – have turned back to God and will not be destroyed? It wouldn't sit well with them. THEY might even kill me! So I cried out to God. *"Let me die. I'm better off dead than alive."* Well, let's just say God wasn't very impressed with me.

"What right do you have to be angry?", he asked. I didn't have a good answer to that question so I just shut up. But I got the message. *"I forgave you, and now you want me to withhold forgiveness from these people. Reality check! I didn't have to put them in the belly of a whale before they turned back to me! Shame on you, Jonah!"*

I've thought about that over the years. Isn't it funny how God can do a really big thing in your life, and it takes us just a few weeks to forget it ever happened. Shame on us all!

So here I was, camped out on a hill, sweltering in the heat, still willing God to do something horrible to the Ninevites. I waited and I waited. I waited so long that God commanded a vine to grow up near my shelter to give me some shade from the sun before I died of heatstroke.

Night came, and I fell asleep. And when I woke up that shady vine was dead. A worm had eaten it. But as my favourite 8th century hymn says, *"God of the worm, God of the whale"*, so I knew who killed the plant. It was God. He was trying to teach me another lesson. Now I really was angry and depressed and defeated. So I just yelled at God again. *"I wish I was dead!"*

And then I heard a still small voice, almost a whisper. *"Jonah. Don't you see what's happening here? You are upset that the vine that was giving you*

shade is dead. But you didn't plant or water that vine, or make it grow. You have absolutely no relationship with that vine at all. And, be honest, if you had left this place, you would have never thought about it again So put yourself in my place. How do you think I feel when I see hundreds of thousands of the people I created, people I love; when I see them lost in sin and on their way to destruction, because Jonah that's what sin does, it kills. Why would I not care for the people of Nineveh? I want them to live!

And that's when I learned two final life lessons.

First, God's amazing grace is for all people. Jew and non-Jew, runaway prophet and fearful sailors, for people of the past and for people today, for Presbyterians and Pentecostals, for churching and unchurching, for Muslim and Buddhist and people of no faith. We have all sinned and fallen sort of God's glory. We all need to be rescued by God.

And, second, I learned that the real reason God had sent me to Nineveh, the reason he insisted I went, wasn't just for the sake of the Ninevites: it was because I needed to grow UP spiritually, and to grow INTO God's will and plans.

Faith, you see, is not about my preferences, my prejudices or my opinions on how the world is supposed to work. Faith is about living in a way that pleases God – and that way is laid out for us in the Scriptures.

Well, I've enjoyed spending time with you but now my job in Nineveh is over I think I'll do a little fishing.

(Jonah grabs a fishing rod)

Did I tell you I was out boating a while back with some other guys and I encountered this really, really big fish?

(Motions with hands)

Honestly, it was as big as this room. I want to catch it. It will look really great.... mounted on my wall!

(Pause)

Prayer of Confession

Let us now confess our sins together:

Almighty God,

You call us, and we do not listen.

We run from you, but we cannot hide.

We are self-centered, not God centered.

We are all about "our" will, not "your" will.

We do not put our faith into action.

We expect mercy, but we refuse to extend it.

Lord, forgive the Jonah in us,

and in your mercy,

forgive our sin

and cause the life of Jesus to flow through us.

Amen.

Hear the good news found in Scripture.

"If we confess our sins, God is merciful and just.

He forgives our sins, and cleanses us from all our wrongdoing."

In Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven

Thanks be to God.

The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Hymn #765 "We've a story to tell to the nations"

Benediction