

We continue this week with the story of Jonah that I'm hoping now is being rebuilt in your minds; the Sunday School story being about a man who gets swallowed by a whale and gets spat out onto dry land, is far from all that this is about. Our story to date gives us this picture of a prophet, a messenger of God, who clearly hears God's direction, but either with a mixture of sheer terror of what he's been asked to do in confronting a barbaric nation, or a complete hatred for the people he's been asked to go to, Jonah decides that it's not for him. So he runs, and he tries to go deeper and further away from God – he goes down to Joppa, then he goes down into a boat, and then he goes down into the bottom of the boat – he's hiding from the God who as we know from the Psalms neither slumbers nor sleeps, a God who watches our comings and goings, a God who knows when we sit or when we lie down. And whilst Jonah goes deeper and deeper into the boat to hide from God, God continues to be present; we can't hide from God. The story shows us Jonah not willing to own up to the prejudices that are in his life, and yet even on that boat we see a repentance from the sailors he is with who turn to the Lord. That reminds us that God is always at work, even if we are rebelling. That place of isolation and emptiness sees Jonah inside a fish for 3 days and 3 nights, a place where God wants him to gather his thoughts and prepare him for what God desires this prodigal prophet to do for him.

Now you would have thought with such rebellion that God would give up on Jonah. After all, this is a time of prophets in the land, so there's bound to be one more willing and suitable to carry out the task. But God has not finished with Jonah, and in a rather ironic act of reminding him of the mess that still needs addressing in his own life, we left last week with the picture of Jonah now back on dry land but covered in fish vomit. The smell will remind him and quiz others about how at times we need to be taught some humility and remember our rebellion.

And yet Jonah's involvement in God's mission is not over. And for us, our mission is not finished after we are baptised. We can't just sit around content that we are alright Jack. We still have work to do. But even if we act like Jonah, even when we drag our feet, we will see some very good news; that God will not stop pouring out his mercy and forgiveness on every corner of the planet, even when we fail him in contributing to his mission, and he will continue to chase after those prodigals.

And so even with Jonah we see this morning that God gives him another chance. Our opening verse, 'Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time'. That should give many of us a real sense of hope today. Maybe you are new this morning to our church family and you're wondering, how can God use me. Well remember that God continues to give us opportunities irrespective of our history or our baggage. Today we might feel, like Jonah in those 3 days in the fish, that we've been through a lot recently. We still have the taint of our past whatever that is, and yet God is able to restore and bring us to a place where we can be used again. That's my hope for all of us this morning as we come out of lockdown; that we know God is restoring us for this next stage. And even if our life history is coated with things we are not proud of, then remember that God called upon Jonah a second time. In fact we see stories of restoration to ministry throughout the bible of people who have failed God. Abraham fled to Egypt, where he lied about his wife, but God gave him another chance. Jacob lied to his father, Isaac, but God restored him and used him to build the nation of Israel. Moses killed a man and fled from Egypt, but God called him to be a leader of His people. Peter denied the Lord three times, but Jesus forgave him and said, "Follow me". We've all failed folks, but wants to restore us. Now it's really important to say, as we have seen with Jonah, that none of these examples is an excuse for sin. Jonah paid

dearly for rebelling against the Lord, so we all need to understand, as Brandy said last week, that our salvation came at a price. But in understanding that, we also shouldn't wallow in the past. God gives us another chance, and he has great plans in store for us and our church family if we are willing to get up and follow him.

So Jonah gets up and obeys the word of the Lord and goes to Nineveh. Nineveh is described here as a great city. We've already talked in previous weeks about it being the capital city of Assyria. Assyria is the biggest and most ruthless empire in the ancient world. Archaeologists have discovered the walls of the city of Nineveh which are miles and miles across, and they have also discovered pictures carved on the walls of the King's complex which outline the nation's stories and military exploits. The pictures are very graphic showing the skinning of people alive; pregnant mothers being impaled on large spikes; bodies piled high outside the city walls so that if people came to attack it they knew what they were letting themselves in for. So when God says to Jonah in chapter 1 that they are wicked people, he really wasn't joking. And so in calling Jonah to speak against this wickedness he is confronting one of the most exceptional instances of human injustice that the world had ever seen.

Can you imagine Jonah walking in to this place and with 8 words declares the fate of Nineveh - "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown". That's all we get; 8 words and he's done.

Jonah's sermon is some of the most intriguing words in the whole book. There's no mention of who is going to overthrow the city, there's no mention of why, there's nothing to suggest there's any way of averting this disaster from happening. But more than anything there's no mention of God. Now either the writer is paraphrasing what Jonah actually says to the people, or else it yet again says something of Jonah's hate for the people he has been called to proclaim this message to. Maybe he hasn't truly come to a place of repentance yet. Here he is - a prophet representing God, and yet Jonah doesn't mention a thing about him. Maybe Jonah doesn't want to see these people repent? We will have to wait to see the nature of his heart after the events in chapter 4.

Whatever the case, in those 8 words, God's word penetrates the heart of the Ninevites. And that is always the case – we shouldn't be surprised – when God's own words are spoken over people, incredible things happen. Hebrews 4:12 says, 'For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart'. If we wonder why we don't see things happen in people's lives then the first thing to ask is whether or not God's Word is being shared with them or is it just our own words. Folks, our words count for nothing if they are not empowered by God. God's Words are full of power. Like Jonah in our text, the important thing is to obey God, go to the place he has instructed, declare the message God provides, and then God does the rest.

And so Verse 5 says that they believed God and a fast is proclaimed. Whether the greatest in society or the least, they all put on sackcloth; a sign that they regretted deeply the things that they had done in the past. So the people repented on the inside through fasting, and on the outside through sackcloth.

And this is where I want us to sit today as we consider the actions of a violent and barbaric people. They have repented and turned from all they have done. But is this because they

consider a God who is full of vengeance and judgment who will destroy them in 40 days? Will he now relent, or is their fate already sealed? Is there action purely out of fear?

In our country you will see signs like the following [IMAGES] and I am so glad we live in a country where scripture can be displayed in public places, but I wonder what message it portrays of God, and is it trying to beat people into a feeling of sheer guilt to submit? I wonder how people would feel if I went down the street of Ballyclare declaring, “40 more days and Ballyclare will be overthrown”. This type of language is not going to be the most popular dinner conversation to have when out with friends and talk to them about divine judgment and repenting of their sins. You see people are happy to have the loving God image and to quote 1 John 4 that “God is love” all day long, but they’re not that fussed on God the judge who in Genesis 19 rains down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah destroying every living thing in the cities including all vegetation.

But the danger I think is also for us is to not address it. If God loves everyone, then why would he punish people in the ways described throughout the Old Testament? And then again if God doesn’t punish people, does the world become overrun with evil? Is it right that Nineveh is given that ultimatum?

I think we can all agree today that the world is a messed up place. But why is it like that? Well I think the easiest answer is that with 7 billion people in our world, there’s 7 billion different decisions going on every minute of every day that along the way clash with each other – and in some cases multiply through selfish gain into manipulation, crime, fraud, death, war, and so on. So what should God do when he sees this? If he says, “Oh those humans, they are so misguided but I love them so much that I will just overlook what they do to each other”, is that truly loving? No I think that would be apathy. You see the opposite of judgment is not love – the opposite of judgment is this – it’s not caring how people behave and treat one another. Here’s an example. Say I’m coming into St John’s one day and I notice that a group of kids from the High School have cornered a wee lad and they are taunting him by emptying his school bag all over the pavement; if I say “Ah those kids, always messing about. But you know they’ll eventually work it out so I will not do anything and mind my own business” – would that be a loving thing to do? Definitely not. Those kids need to be stopped and held accountable for their cruel actions. That’s the judgment that must be given, because it’s an expression of love. It looks at the injustice of a situation and intervenes, bringing love to the downtrodden and innocent.

So for God to love people who are made in his image, and to protect the things of this earth, there has ultimately got to be judgment on the things that are against his will. If God doesn’t invoke judgment on the mess of this world, then he’s not caring or loving or engaged. A god who does not seek after justice for the oppressed, who does not care about rescuing those who have been hurt by oppressors ultimately is no god of love. Therefore we must have a God who brings judgment on all who would choose to walk a path of sin. It’s only through Jesus that a way is created for a restored relationship with God for those that trust him as their saviour. Without that relationship, people are destined for destruction.

And so does that make it right that God will have mercy on these evil Ninevites? No, because they have turned to him as Lord. Paul says to the Romans in Romans 15 “God will have mercy on whom he has mercy and he will have compassion on who he has compassion”. He is going to show mercy to the Ninevites. It doesn’t matter how opposed

Jonah might be to preach to them, God will have his way. Even though Jonah has not said God in his 8 word sermon, God granted by his own grace in the Ninevites minds to understand what Jonah was saying and to respond in repentance to the message.

So what should we think as we finish?

The most important thing to understand in this passage is the infinite goodness of God on sinful people. Look how low He stoops to interact with people in this story. He's dealing with a moody prophet, and then an even more terrible city, but he is pouring his love and his grace over all of them. What Jonah failed to realise was how true his words really were. He said that the city would be overthrown or overturned in 40 days. And how true that would be, but God wouldn't need 40 days, it happened within minutes as these people were turned over from the kingdom of sin and darkness, and they were turned towards God's kingdom of life and repentance, and forgiveness.

The good news is that God turns our evil and selfish hearts as well, because like the Ninevites, we were spiritually dead but God has poured out his Spirit so that our stony hearts can become hearts of flesh that even love our enemies in Christ's name. Ezekiel 36:26 promises us, irrespective of our past, our sin, our rejection of God, that when we turn to him he says to us, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh".

Folks, remember today that the grace and mercy of the Lord is so deep, so loving, and so forgiving that he invites us now to participate in his own life and mission. I'll never be able to do the Jonah 8 word sermon, but here's my 16 word sermon for you today, "Turn to God afresh this day in repentance, leave behind that old life and follow him". Amen.