

January 24 2021 [St. Andrew's]

Jonah 3:1-10

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

One: This is the Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: "Ready to Change"

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown"

I don't know how many Sundays I could get away
with preaching an eight-word sermon like Jonah did!

I suspect you'd all wonder what was going on
if I said one sentence and sat down.

Although...it might be a welcome break at least once in a while!

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown"

has got to be the shortest sermon ever delivered.

But it had a powerful impact.

(As we saw in our children's story)

This was the second time that God had sent Jonah to Nineveh.

The first time God told Jonah to go
and preach repentance to the people of Nineveh,
Jonah one-eighty-ed and took off
in the exact opposite direction,
going as far and as fast as he could
away from where God wanted him to go.

We don't know why, at least we won't until the end of the book.

Some people think Jonah was scared to go to wicked, foreign Nineveh,
and there's some merit in that;
Nineveh was the main city of Babylon,
and Babylon was an enemy empire of God's people.
We'll find out why, though, later on.

The main thing right now is that Jonah didn't want to go
and he thought he could escape God's reach
by getting on a fast boat to Tarshish.
But, oh, Jonah was in for a surprise!

Because the God of Israel is not just God *in* Israel –
God is God of everywhere and everyone,
in every town and city, on land and at sea,
in the hold of a ship and in the belly of a great fish.
There is no place we can go to escape him.

After Jonah's experience of being a fish treat
– which includes a wonderful psalm of repentance in Jonah chapter 2 –
he is spat out onto dry land
and God sends him to Nineveh again.
This time, he goes.

Now, before we get too much further along,
we need to know a couple of things about prophecies in the Old Testament.
God and his people have a special kind of agreement, a covenant,
based on mutual faithfulness and care.

The covenant outlines specific attitudes and ways of living for God's people
that help them to shape their lives around God's word
and move them in the direction of holiness.
Within the bounds of that promise,
God has a specific set of actions he will take
to nudge his people back on track if they stray,
which escalate the longer his people
stay strayed.

So a prophet might make a prophecy like
if you don't stop neglecting the widows and orphans in your community,
God will see to it that your crops will not grow.

If you start looking after the vulnerable members of your group again,
all well and good;
no drought or crop failure necessary,
prophecy unfulfilled.

But if you escalate, and say, start giving foreigners a hard time, too,
 then your crops will fail,
 as agreed upon in the covenant law
 and as prophesied by God's prophet.
 And you'll get a follow-up prophecy after that, too,
 another attempt by God through his prophet
 to get you turned around
 and back on track
 to holy living.

Because God only judges where he loves and intends to save.

But! You may be thinking right now that the people of Nineveh are not
 strictly speaking part of Israel,
 the people with whom God made these promises...
 ...yet, the king of Nineveh says enough to let us know
 that he recognised his people's violent, evil ways
 as contrary to the way Jonah's God
 wanted them to live.

So someone – Jonah, perhaps?
 in an addendum to his super-punchy eight-word sermon? –
 someone must have given them a little more detail
 than just this pronouncement of change your ways or else.

But whatever it was the people of Nineveh heard or didn't hear from Jonah,
 the most striking thing about this story
 is how they responded to God's Word:
 they were ready and willing to change.

I mean, the image of a king sitting in heap in front of his throne
 dressed in scratchy old sackcloth in the dust
 is a little dramatic
 and picturing even the cows and the goats wearing sackcloth
 funny.

is a little

But it does tell us just how deep
 that readiness to change went,
 and that it was everyone
 – from king to ordinary citizen to the livestock –
 everyone was ready to repent.
 Because that is
 what we're seeing here:
 repentance.

It's a familiar church-and-Bible word;
 a little old-fashioned, maybe.
 But it's an important one;
 because repentance is whole lot more
 than sackcloth and apologies.

Repentance involves a kind of self-awareness
 of who we are and what we think and do,
 but it's self-awareness from God's perspective.

So the first step is a moment of insight
 – that I believe is itself a gift from God –
 in which we really see for ourselves
 how far we are
 from being the person God created us to be.

And then we turn:
 away from the old ways of thinking and acting,
 away from whatever it was that was stopping us
 from growing more and more like Christ,
 and we turn to God.
 And God works within us,
 to change us and transform us.

Just like for the Ninevites,
 repentance is the first and most important change we make,
 with God's help.
 It's the big one-eighty on our lives
 that points us squarely at God,
 at the new waying of living and being
 that Jesus demonstrated
 and made possible for us.

And it's a "repeat-as-needed" action, too;
 repentance is an on-going dialogue and movement between us and God,
 definitely every week in church together,
 and maybe at times, every day,
 one-on-one with Jesus.

So through Jonah's prophetic warning,

the people of Nineveh got a glimpse of themselves through God's eyes;
and they repented, and they changed.
But for Jonah himself, change was a good deal harder.

Jonah changed his actions during the part of his story that we've looked at so far.
He went from running far and fast away from God
to making a genuine about-face, doing what God told him.

In the wonderful psalm that Jonah sings in chapter 2,
while he's in the belly of the fish,
Jonah recognises himself as sunk
to the deepest depths, both physically and spiritually:
"all your waves and your billows passed over,"
Jonah cries; "I am driven from your sight."

But then he asks for help and God answers,
lifting Jonah up from the depths and back onto dry land.
And Jonah does what God asks and goes to Nineveh.

Now if the story ended where we stopped reading today,
this would be an uncomplicated story of change,
and having the willingness to change for God and for our faith.
But in Jonah chapter 4, we find out that
although Jonah's actions changed,
his mind and his heart hadn't.

On the inside, Jonah was still full of anger and resentment;
it turns out that he hadn't wanted to go to Nineveh in the first place
because he knew that God would most likely let them off,
and Jonah didn't approve of that.
"That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish,"
Jonah says, "I knew that you are a gracious God
and merciful, slow to anger
and abounding in steadfast love,
and relenting from disaster."

God does his best to explain to Jonah
why God acted the way God did;
but Jonah persists in being melodramatically angry:
"O Lord, take my life from me,
it is better for me to die than live."

What's in Jonah's heart and mind
– his inner narrative, if you like –
is much harder to change than his outward actions.

Jonah's just not willing to change how he thinks and feels,
even if he is more than happy to be rescued by God
himself and to *do* as he's told in return.

There is a lot going on in this story of God's redemption and mercy.
But this week, let's reflect together on the willingness to change.
Because unlike so many other parts of Scripture,
this story is not primarily about what God did
in the life of an individual or a community.

It's about what that individual or community was willing to change
– what they needed to change –
to make room for God in their life.
And that story unfolds very differently for Jonah
than it did for the people of Nineveh.

The ideal situation is for our outward actions
to be a reflection of our inner being;
so for a person who is a big advocate for caring for the environment,
well, we'd expect them to "practice what they preach,"
to recycle, to pick up garbage,
to use reusable shopping bags, that sort of thing.

And to flip that around, it's also possible to go through the motions, too,
without the inner feeling or intent behind it.
And I think that changing what's going on in our heads and hearts
is a lot harder than changing what we do;
most of us can behave ourselves in public if we need to,
we can usually manage to say and do
the decent thing at the right time.

But changing our inner narrative,
the story we tell ourselves about the world,
about other people and about how we fit into it all...
...that's more of a challenge.
But, you know, there are times in our lives
when we do need to change;
times when we are so stuck in who we are
and what we think
that there is absolutely
no room in there
for God to come in and work within us.

And God wants to work within us and within our lives;

God wants to transform us, from the inside out.
And God will!
But it might take some effort on our end too.

So let's ask the question:
what are we ready and willing to change about ourselves
to make more room for God?

I can't answer that question for you,
and neither can anyone else;
that conversation needs to be between you and God.

But one of the things I believe we're all struggling with right now
is our inner narrative,
especially the story that we're all telling ourselves about the world.
I know I am!

Every once and a while,
this inner litany of worry and uncertainty
will take over in my head and heart,
all surrounding coronavirus
and what it means for the future as churches,
and as communities.
And also what it means for things like
my own safety and health,
and the safety and health
of the people I care about.

Do you have an inner narrative like that right now too?
Or does your head and heart fill you
with other thoughts and feelings
that crowd out God?

Consider spending some time this week
listening closely to what's happening on the inside of you,
and reflect on who you are and who God wants you to be.
What would it take to change our heads and hearts
to make more room in there for God?

Praying more is the obvious place to start.
What better way to make room for anyone
in your head and heart
than by spending time in conversation with them?
It's the same with God.

If you're a worrier like me,
 turn your worries into a list of prayer requests...
 ...and then try to let God worry about them!
 If you get frustrated with people or situations,
 pray about them...
 ...not the way Jonah would,
 but the way Jesus would.

Reading the Bible, God's Word, on your own,
 without the extra voice of a devotional writer – even me! – is good, too; I
 recommend Mark's action-news-style gospel,
 if you're looking for a place to start!

Go for a walk;
 eat foods that are healthy for your body and that uplift your heart;
 be intentional about putting down your phone or your tablet,
 or at least putting them on "do not disturb"
 for at least part of your day.

And this is one I struggle with
 – check the news once a day, and then leave it be until tomorrow.
 My news time is my mid-morning tea-break,
 and I have now forbidden myself
 from ever looking at the news
 after 9:30pm!

Small, but significant changes,
 easy things to do that require only a little commitment and resolve,
 but will make room for God
 to begin transforming us,
 re-writing our inner narratives
 into stories of growing trust
 and lasting relationship with him.

We can find the time for this, I promise.
 I can even do a Jonah for you,
 and make it an eight-word sermon, easy to remember:
 let's make changes that make room for God.

If we're ready and willing to make small, positive changes in our lives
 that affect our faith, that make room for our faith to grow,
 then our faith will be strengthened.
 It's as simple as that!

And you know, I think it's part of being Christian,

of understanding repentance as more than feeling bad and saying sorry;
as people of faith we're called
to try to make good changes in our lives,
changes that will allow God to come into
our heads and hearts
and work within us in new ways.
And Scripture assures us that if we try,
God, with all his grace and mercy
and patience and love,
God will meet us more than halfway,
and we will be transformed.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.