

“On the Way to Nineveh”

Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

24 January 2021

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“In archaeology you uncover the unknown. In diplomacy you cover the known”

Thomas Pickering

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A rabbi who lived in a small Russian town at the turn of the 20th century had long been pondering the deepest religious questions. After twenty years of contemplation, he finally concluded that when he got right down to it, he just didn’t know. Shortly after reaching this conclusion, he was walking across the Village Square toward the synagogue to pray. A Cossack, a local czarist cop, was in a mood to harass the rabbi. “Hey rabbi, where do you think you are going?” The rabbi answered, “I don’t know.” This response thoroughly infuriated the Cossack constable.

“What do you mean ‘you don’t know where you’re going?’ Every morning at eleven o’clock you cross this village square on the way to the synagogue to pray, and here it is eleven o’clock, and you’re going in the direction of the synagogue, and you try to tell me you don’t know where you’re going. You’re trying to make a fool out of me. I’ll teach you what a bad idea that is.”

The Cossack then seized the rabbi and hauled him off to the local jail. Just as the Cossack was throwing the rabbi into a cell, the rabbi turned to the Cossack and commented, “You asked me where I was going. You see, you just don’t know.” The rabbi was a wise man. We never really know where we are going, do we?

Our Bible text offers us a similar surprise. Jonah, from the beginning of this whopper of a fish-tale, thought he knew where he was going. But at each and every turn, Jonah really did not know where he was going. But that detail does not seem important to the storyteller. To the storyteller the only thing that is important is that Yahweh knows where Jonah is going. Perhaps, this is one of the story's main points. We may not know where we are going—but God does. Hear the lesson:

[3:1] The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, [2] “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” [3] 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. [4] Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” [5] And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth . . . [10] When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it (Jonah 3:1-5, 10).

We begin anew as the great fish deposits our prophet Jonah back upon the dry land. We might wonder if this were the end of the story, or if there would be more. Frankly, we soon find out that Yahweh has not concluded with Jonah yet—or with Nineveh either. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time. This divine directive to Jonah is practically identical with the first command. Jonah is to go to Nineveh and proclaim the message that the Lord will reveal to him. What will Jonah do this time? We wonder. But soon we learn that instead of running away, Jonah surrenders to Yahweh's new task (or is it an old task?). Jonah goes to Nineveh.

The storyteller does not want us to miss the importance and grandeur of Nineveh. The writer uses “literary hyperbole” and indicates the city's magnitude. The narrator

relates: “Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city; a three days’ walk across.” If a person in the ancient world, used to walking everywhere, walked an average of twenty miles a day, then the writer wants us to imagine that Nineveh is sixty miles from one side to the other. This fact suggests a city the size of the area between Salado and Austin. I’m not sure that even Mexico City, for example, with a population today of some 22 million+ people, occupies this much land area. Nevertheless, the writer tells us that this is a great city with a vast population. Thus, Jonah’s task is important. Upon arrival, “Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ ”

Regrettably, we learn that Jonah’s preaching mission is mostly a halfhearted effort. First Jonah only “begins” to go into Nineveh, and then only one day’s journey—not even to the heart of the city. He does the minimum. We all know folks like this. They do just enough. Second, Jonah’s unenthused preaching mission consists of five Hebrew words. In English: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” A five-word sermon hardly seems worth the bother. Jonah wants to fail.

Yet, God directs the action. After Jonah’s lackluster sermon, we learn that “The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.” From the king to the animals in the barnyard they all repent—because as the king reasons: “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” It is interesting that the king

of Nineveh seems to grasp God's mercy lost on Jonah. We sometimes forget that biblical repentance leads to a changing of God's mind—at least on a few occasions. Two incidents come to mind.

[Sodom and Gomorrah] Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? [24] Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? [25] Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" [26] And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." [27] Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. [28] Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." [29] Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." [30] Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." [31] He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." [32] Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." [33] And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place (Genesis 18:23-33).

[Golden calf and Hebrew idolatry] But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? [12] Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. [13] Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' " [14] And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Exodus 32:11-14).

Jonah has been fabulously successful as a preacher. He preached a five-word sermon, but all—from the king to the animals—repent. The Lord turned aside from the wrath he was to do to the city. "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had

said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.” If this is not a happy story of proclaiming God’s Word, repentance, and conversion, I do not know what is. But Jonah, as chapter 4 tells us is not happy. With God you never know what to expect.

A preacher told me a story about one of his church members, a physician. She related this story about her then four-year-old daughter. On the way to preschool one morning, the doctor had left her stethoscope on the car seat, and her little girl picked it up and began playing with it. “Be still, my heart!” thought the mother/doctor. “My daughter wants to follow in my footsteps!” Then the child spoke into the instrument: “Welcome to Jack-in-the-box. May I take your order?” You just never know?!?!

We don’t always get what we bargained for nor what we expect. Jonah had high hopes early in his ministry that God would love those whom Jonah loved and that God would hate those whom Jonah hated. Still, about this Lord God, this mysterious Yahweh character, one can never be too sure. We think we know what we want and we hope God will see things our way. Sometimes, we really don’t know where we are going or with whom we go as we journey with this God.

Yahweh seemingly forgives the wrong people. One apparent lesson from Jonah is this: Grace aimed toward us always feels good and right. But when God lays God’s grace on others—it does not always look so good to us. This is where we end today. Now and then, in God’s world, grace smells a little fishy. At least it smelled fishy to Jonah who

hated the people of Nineveh as much as God loved them. You just never know?!?!

Amen.

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