



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 3RD EPIPHANY
JONAH 3:1-10 & MARK 1:14-20
JANUARY 24, 2021

“WHO KNOWS ... MAYBE EVEN THEY WILL TURN!”

Jonah is the most reluctant of prophets. Many of them questioned whether they were up to the task – Amos insisted he *“was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but only a keeper of sycamore trees”* – he supposed he didn’t have enough learning. Isaiah pleaded his own sinfulness, *“woe is me; I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips”* – he assumed he’d have no credibility. Jeremiah invoked his youth, saying *“Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak, I am only a child.”* But Jonah “takes the cake” as they say – not only reluctant - he was convinced those he was sent to weren’t worth it – not the people of the Assyrian city of Nineveh – no way would they ever turn to God, or worse, he don’t want them to.

God tells Jonah *“Go and proclaim to the great city of Nineveh the message I give you.”* It was a tidy, succinct message – *“forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”* Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, they spoke volumes – long oracles of woe, calls to repentance with specifics of what folks needed to repent of, and on occasion olive branches of hope that God would forgive and again speak tenderly to them. Nothing doing with Jonah – and while his words are remarkably sharp and few, the story inside this story is expressed when Jonah betrays his heart – not when Ninevites cleanse theirs. Jonah didn’t want them forgiven – he wanted them destroyed.

Jonah’s name in Hebrew means “dove.” Yet he is anything but – more like a vulture to those he views with suspicion or disdain. The German language, which I’m sure I’m about to mangle, has a word for when someone derives satisfaction from the misfortune of others - *“schadenfreude.”* Jonah is exhibit A of what that word means. We are Christians - the Spirit of God that descended upon our Lord at his baptism - like a dove, lives in us. In not an insignificant sense we are to be “innocent as doves.” But the story of Jonah insists we proclaim the message God has given us and it’s anything but gentle. It is a message of repentance.

We “doves” are called to speak truth to the culture around us – “fishers of men” who bring people to Christ, Christ to people and speak truth to falsehood. Doing so will be impossible if our hearts drift from God’s and like Jonah we prefer that the ills and evil of this world, those whom they plague or in whom it reigns be dealt with by God harshly, the sooner the better, rather than how God treated him and us – in mercy and with much patience. Of repentant Nineveh Jonah said *“Is this not what I said when I was still at home...that you were a gracious and compassionate God, “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love?”*

Nothing in this story hints that Nineveh and its people were guiltless – the first time God told Jonah to “go” he added *“preach against it...because it’s wickedness has come up before me.”* There is no mistaken identity involved ...Jonah did not arrive only to have God say *“oh...never mind – just leave them alone.”*

What they were and did was wrong in God's sight. They needed saving. And God was preparing them for it long before his reluctant prophet arrived. Just so God is at work even as we think that our own culture, and most of the world could all be regarded as one big Nineveh.

Last week Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis President Neel Kashkari was asked about the economic impact of the pandemic, and he said *"I don't think the economy is more resilient to Covid; unfortunately, I think our tolerance for death is much higher than we thought back in the spring."* I wondered if that remark wasn't out of place, since the debate over the scientific, cultural and religious response to the pandemic will wage for years.

But it was his subsequent comment that we tolerate up to 3000 deaths a day as an acceptable price for *"opening up the economy"* that was particularly jarring to me so close to the anniversary this week of a Supreme Court decision in 1973 that enshrined in our constitution the right to an abortion, the termination of nascent life, and against the backdrop of states embedding *"right to die"* statues in their laws for the very population of people we've seen be so vulnerable to the Coronavirus, whose involuntary deaths this past year we grieve.

It should not have, it seems to me, surprised Mr. Kashkari that when life and personal liberty, sometimes understood as personal well-being hang in the balance the latter's allure among our species is overwhelmingly strong. And yet, there is good news. As reluctant as many of us are to talk about these issues of life – it is reported that fewer women are choosing abortion – and that this is a trend that has held for nearly 3 decades. Minds and hearts can change – let us pray that in this most important work of the church, whose Lord said *"I came that they may have life"* we remain vigilant and never give in to despair nor to *"schadenfreude"* – ill will toward those who make such a choice.

Few nations raise the hairs on the back our head as does Iran. It would be easy for us to *"schadenfreude"* a country like that, to wish it nothing but ill, if not for the fact that few nations on earth report as steady an increase in its Christian population. Iran has been affected greatly by the pandemic, and yet its Christian workers and pastors have made much of the opportunities presented them. One them told the Christian organization *Voice of the Martyrs* that *"the devil is never angry at pastors who sit still."* I'll have to take that to heart! But my heart and all ours should rejoice that many in this Nineveh resembling nation are turning to the Lord Jesus. *"I came that they may have life,"* and life in Christ many Iranians are finding. To God be the glory!

"Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned". It is of no little significance that the word translated as *"overturned"* in the Hebrew language also means *"change"* or *"transform."* Thus, did God *"overturn"* sin into godliness and sorrow into joy. Even...apparently, that of the city's cows! Jonah is a whale of a story isn't it! There is quite clearly something though in the confluence of a message of grace to sinners and sinners who turn over to God reluctance to live it and deliver it that is potent. From it may we never turn. AMEN