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Jonah 1:1-3 – *Stinky People, Compassionate God*

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Jonah 1:1-3

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup>But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

About 2 years ago I was out walking Bailey around the island in front of our house...

I would walk around the island while she is off-leash doing her sniffing and business.

It's not uncommon for her to sniff, drop down, and roll in the grass somewhere...

So, when I saw her do it on this occasion, I didn't think anything of it.

But when we got back into the house—

As I was taking off her collar—

A putrid smell made its way to my nose.

I rubbed her back and felt something hard and crusty...

Then I dared to put my nose down to it and sniff.

I almost lost my stomach.

Upon further inspection it turns out she rolled in human feces.

There was a pair of soiled underwear on the island...

And Bailey thought it to be a good idea to have a roll.

Coming back into the house...

There was no way I was missing that smell.

That's what's going on in our passage today:

There is a stink coming up before the nose of the Lord.

The wickedness of the Ninevites has ascended into the presence of God.

Nineveh—

A major city in the Assyrian Empire—

Is a city known for its murderous violence.

History documents some of its leaders accustomed to brutality and cruelty:

One leader would tear the lips and hands off his victims;

Another flayed victims alive and made piles of their skulls. (Billy Smith)

Assyria was a powerful empire...

An empire that everyone feared...

And Nineveh was at the heart of it all.

But the evil deeds of the people of Nineveh are known to the Lord...

God knows them...God sees them...God *smells* them...

And they don't smell pleasing to God.

So the word of the Lord comes to Jonah the prophet:

"Arise Jonah, go to Nineveh and cry out against it."

"Tell them that they stink to me."

And what does Jonah do?

He arises just as the Lord commands.

But instead of heading east to Nineveh—

Which is about 500 miles from Israel—

He gets up and heads due west to the port...

Boarding a ship to Tarshish...

Thought to be some 2,000 miles in the opposite direction.

God uses prophets to communicate his word...

The word of the Lord comes to Jonah—

This is no small thing—

Jonah is expected to deliver a message to the people of Nineveh...

Instead, he turns the other way.

If we look at this short passage, we really have 2 major problems going on:

Sins of commission...

Something we *do/commit* that we are not supposed to do according to God's standards.

We don't know the extent of the wickedness in Nineveh...

But we know it stinks because they're committing something they shouldn't be doing.

And sin of omission...

Something that we *don't do* when we should be doing it.

God's command to Jonah is pretty clear...

And he fails to act on it.

## **PAGE II**

I think it's good to pause here and ask where we land in this story.

If we picture our lives as putting off a smell—

A smell that ascends to the Lord—

Is that a pleasant smell—

Fresh lavender or fresh baked bread?

Or is it an unpleasant smell—

A ripe hockey bag or human feces on a dog?

In our life as Christ's disciples...

Are we engaged in this continual process of growing in our love for God?

Are we taking the time necessary to build this relationship with our Creator?

Is it the top priority among many other competing priorities?

Are we living in obedience to the way God wants us to live?

Are we making progress in growing in our love for others?

Can we look back at even this past week—

The things we've said or done when under stress—  
 And do we see the image of Christ shining through us?  
 Is it a pleasant smell?  
 Or are we putting off a foul smell?  
 Are we doing something we know we shouldn't be doing?  
 We sense the conviction of the Holy Spirit—  
 We have a feeling of guilt—  
 But we can't seem to turn away.  
 Or do we know that God is calling us to *do* something...  
 And yet we remain stubborn in our refusal to act?  
 Kind of like Jonah.

What kind of smell is our life putting off?  
 Sins of commission...  
 And sins of omission.

### **PAGE III**

For the Ninevites it's as if they are a dog who rolls around in something rotten...  
 Their wickedness wafts up before the Lord.  
 But what we have to see about this book—  
 More than a story of a man swallowed by a fish—  
 Is that it points us to a God who is full of compassion...  
 Full of compassion for a stinky people...  
 And we see this compassion in God's sending Jonah to them.

Why does Jonah not want to go to Nineveh?  
 Why does Jonah turn and burn the other way?  
 Is it because he's afraid?  
 After all the Assyrians have a reputation for being violent toward their enemies...  
 And Israel is a bitter enemy.

What would that be like for Jonah to step right in the middle of this city...

And preach to them God's judgment?

Maybe it would be like one of us receiving a call to go to Moscow—

The heart of Russia—

And cry out against it for their war on Ukraine.

I don't foresee that being received well.

So maybe it was fear that caused Jonah to run away.

But toward the end of the book...

We actually find out what his rejection of God is all about.

In Jonah 4:2 Jonah says:

“Oh Lord! That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.”

We'll talk more about this in the coming weeks...

But what happens is that Jonah reluctantly goes to Nineveh...

He does cry out against the city (in a pathetic 5 word sermon)...

And an amazing thing happens:

All of the Ninevites—

From the king down to the lowest peasant and even animal—

Repent and turn from their evil ways.

They listen to God's word...

And God holds back his judgment.

And Jonah says, “See God! I knew this would happen! You're a gracious God, and I knew you were going to show mercy and compassion to these wicked people.”

[“Sorry for being merciful, Jonah. Sheesh!” – God]

God's aim in sending Jonah to Nineveh...

Is to extend his mercy and compassion.

God comes to these stinky people—

These brutal, murderous people...

These people who are bitter enemies of *God's* people Israel—

And God shows them compassion.

The Ninevites don't do anything to deserve this mercy—

They don't beg God to send a prophet to show them if their ways are right...

They do nothing to seek God out—

God chooses to come to them as an act of divine compassion.

As Psalm 86 says:

“You, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God,”

“Slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”

#### **PAGE IV**

And this shouldn't surprise us...

Because this is who God is for us.

God shows his full compassion in sending Jesus to us.

Remember how we talked about what we smelled like to God:

We talked about things we do that go against God's will for our lives;

And we talked about things we don't do that God is wanting from us?

Sins of commission and omission?

There's more to the story than that:

There's an original stink that we have—

A stink that we inherited long before we are responsible for active stink.

We choose to roll around and get ourselves stinky (active sin) ...

But even before this we're born with an original funk (passive sin).

It wasn't always this way...

God created us good and pleasing to him.

But our first ancestors turned away from God—

They rolled in the stink—

And now all of us come with this original stink.

So, even if you somehow manage to live life without sins of commission and omission—

Which by the way is highly unlikely—

All of us come stinky.

Original stink, sins of commission, and sins of omission...

From God's perspective...

We may not smell too much better than the Ninevites.

But God's mercy toward us is no less.

God himself comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

God sends the best—

His son—

To declare to us not a message of condemnation for our sins...

But a message of salvation by his own doing. (John 3:16-17)

If you've ever wrestled with—

Or if you're currently wrestling with—

The question, "Is my sin too great for God?"

"Is God so displeased with me that I'm a lost cause?"

Take heart!

God smells your stink...

It's not hidden from him as much as we try to hide it.

But God doesn't turn away from you...

No matter what you've done or refused to do...

God turns toward you...

And does what is necessary to clean you off.

When Bailey rolled around in the poop...

Did I open the back gate and gave her the boot?

No!

I took her into the bath tub and gave her a bath.

Now, *I* did it grudgingly...

But God does it with delight.

God loves his children and he delights in showering them with his compassion and mercy.

Not because we deserve it—

There's nothing we can do to earn it—

Simply because God chooses to exercise his divine compassion toward us.

Jesus goes to the cross for our sin...

He is raised from the dead for our life...

And it's all because God chooses to do it out of his love.

And now we're in Jonah's position.

We have God's divine word—

Yes, the written word that tells us in ink the story of redemption—

But also, the word written on our heart. (Jer 31:33-34)

The Holy Spirit enters into our life...

And makes Christ's work effective for us.

Christ's work of salvation becomes a part of who we are...

On the inside and on the outside.

We're no longer an unpleasant stink that comes up to God's nose...

Because of God's work through Christ, we become a delight...

Like the beautiful smell of the blooming spring lilacs.

But the smell is not just for us...

It's for the rest of the world.

We share the same task given to Jonah:

Delivering God's word to the world.

While Jonah's word was one of judgment...

We get to deliver a word of rescue and redemption.

We get to tell people that there is hope for this life, and it's found in Christ...

There is forgiveness for those sins we think are unforgivable...

And it only comes through faith in Christ.

We get the privilege of telling people that God is compassionate...

That he is slow to anger and abounding in love.

Our prophetic task is to witness to the mercy of our God...

How God has been gracious in our lives...

And how he extends that through Christ to the world.

May we know the power of God's Spirit filling us...

Leading us to be bold in our task...

And moving us to declare the divine compassion of our God to a hurting world.

All for God's glory and for the good of this world that he loves.

Amen.