

Michael McGowan

Jonah 3:1-10 – *The Gift of Repentance*

Preached at Trinity CRC

June 26, 2022

Jonah 3:1-10

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: <sup>2</sup>“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

<sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” <sup>5</sup>The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

<sup>10</sup>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.

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

In the movie *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*...

Neal Page and Del Griffith are driving in a car...

It’s late at night and they’re on the highway without many other cars around.

Del is driving when a car on the other side of the highway pulls up alongside them.

The driver is honking his horn and trying to tell Neal and Del something.

It’s loud with the windows down and they can’t make out the words...

Del first suggests that the guy wants to race...

Then he reasons that he's been drinking.

Finally, Neal makes out what he's saying:

"You're going the wrong way!"

"How does he know where we're going," retorts Del, "what a moron."

"No, the wrong direction!!" shouts the man in the other car.

"Turn around!"

Just then the lights of two semis are shown coming right at their car.

Del has been driving the wrong direction on the highway...

He needs to turn around before he gets smashed by another vehicle.

The Ninevites are in desperate need of a course correction...

They need to turn around...

Because they're about to experience the Lord's wrath against their wickedness.

If you remember what we said a few weeks ago...

Nineveh has a reputation for being violent:

They are brutal toward their enemies—

Known for their dismembering tactics;

And they aren't much better toward their own people—

Injustice, violence, and wickedness that defines their daily lives.

The vocabulary used in our passage is reminiscent of words used in Genesis...

When the Lord expresses his displeasure with the deeds of 2 cities:

Sodom and Gomorrah.

There is none righteous found in these cities—

And their deeds are detestable to the Lord—

So the Lord "overthrows" them...

Raining down burning sulfur...

Destroying not just the buildings...

But the people and all of the vegetation too. (Gen 19:24)

*This* is the fate awaiting Nineveh...

The Lord's wrath against wickedness.

So, the Lord sends his messenger Jonah with these words:

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” (Jonah 3:4)

Essentially, “You’re going the wrong way! Turn around!”

## PAGE II

The word we’re talking about but haven’t said yet is “repentance.”

Repentance is turning...

Turning from one direction to head another.

In Christian repentance...

There is a conviction of sin from God’s Spirit—

That what I’ve been doing is wrong;

There’s a confession of that sin...

My own admission of it...owning it;

Then there’s a stopping of that specific behavior, thought, or attitude;

And finally, a turning to follow God.

You’re going one way that’s not great...

Then you turn around and head in the other direction.

Hopefully I don’t need to tell you that all of us sin.

Not one of us gets it right all the time.

We do things that go against God’s design for life (God’s law) ...

And we put ourselves on a crash course with his just punishment.

I’m not here to convince you of that this morning.

Today we’re talking about repentance...

What actions we take when we’re going the wrong way.

Is repentance easy?

No, repentance is hard work!

If all of us recognize that we're not perfect—

That we all sin—

Then how come we don't see acts of repentance more often?

Why aren't we quicker to admit our wrong against our spouse, children, boss, co-workers, or neighbor?

What makes repentance such a hard discipline?

I'm going to offer some reasons why I think repentance is hard:

First, I think it's an instinct to become defensive when confronted with something we've done wrong. (Gavin Ortlund)

“Yes, but look at what they did to me.”

Or, “Look at how I was raised and tell me you wouldn't do the same thing.”

We're saying, “Get that criticism away from me...”

“I'm not taking responsibility for it.”

When our sin or wrong-doing is exposed...

We put up walls to protect ourselves.

Another reason repentance is hard is fear.

If we've built our identity on what people think of us—

If anything threatens to make us look bad—

Well then, we want nothing to do with it.

If people see that we're not as good or perfect as we think we are...

Then our identity starts to erode.

Out of fear we hide our wrongs.

In the same vein...

It's hard for a lot of us to accept that we're not perfect.

We have yet to let in that we're just like everyone else...

Everyone else who gets angry and does things they shouldn't do...

Who gets caught up in destructive cycles and habits.

Sometimes our view of others is skewed.

We see others as having it all together.

“Everyone else is so much holier than I am...”

“All I want to do is hide my stuff where no one can see it.”

“I’m going to put on a face and pretend that I’m okay...”

### PAGE III

No, repentance is not easy—

Turning away from sin is uncomfortable and feels unnatural—

But look at what comes as its fruit:

“When God saw the Ninevites turn from their evil ways...”

“God did not destroy them.” (3:10)

### **God relents when Nineveh repents.**

This scene we have here is absolutely incredible!

Remember, Nineveh is known for their violence.

They’re the bad boys on the block...

The most-powerful empire at the time.

No nation or person tells them what to do...

Especially not their puny enemy, Israel.

They could’ve easily laughed Jonah out of the city...

Or worse, cut off his arms, legs, and head...

And shipped him back to Israel in a box.

But, after hearing Jonah’s short, 5-word sermon...

We read, “The Ninevites believed God.” (3:5)

They received Jonah’s words as coming from God—

*God* was calling them to repent—

And they listened.

They didn’t respond in pride...

“How dare *you* tell *us* what to do!”;

They didn't try to justify their actions...

“This is just what we have to do to keep other people in line”;

They didn't become defensive...

“Yeah, but look at what they try doing to us!”

They don't write off Jonah's God...

“That's your god, not ours.”;

The Lord calls out their sin...

And the Ninevites believe God.

There is wide-spread repentance...

“From the greatest to the least” it says...

A way of saying that everyone was involved in the turn-around.

The king himself—

The most powerful man in the world at the time—

Takes off his royal robes...

Dresses in sackcloth...

And sits in the dust.

Usually, a king of this standing would be adorned with fine royal garments...

Having the most expensive material for his clothes....

Sitting in the place of highest honor in the empire...his throne.

But the king humbles himself.

He receives God's word...

And calls everyone to give up their evil ways.

When God sees that they mourn over their sin...

And turn away from their wickedness...

He turns away his wrath.

The fruit of their repentance...

Is deliverance.

God relents, when Nineveh repents.

PAGE IV

It's tempting to make the Ninevites and their king the stars of this story:

“Look at how these evil people turned!”

“What a gesture of pure humility!”

But how is it that this whole city—

Full of violence and evil—

Repents at just these brief words from Jonah?

From the very beginning of the book of Jonah...

We've seen the Lord (Yahweh) is the one in control:

The Lord commands his prophet where to go;

The Lord sends the storm upon the ship;

Jonah confesses Yahweh as the one who made the sea and dry land;

The Lord stills the storm when they throw Jonah overboard;

The Lord sends a giant fish to save Jonah;

The Lord commands the fish to spit Jonah out;

The Lord gets the stubborn prophet to go to Nineveh.

This book is all about God's sovereign rule.

Do we really think it was the Ninevites turning themselves to God?

Back in verse 3—

When it talks about the city of Nineveh—

The original language is hard to translate into English.

The NIV reads, “Nineveh was a very large city.”

The literal translation is, “Nineveh was a great city to God.”

Hebrew language scholars debate the meaning of the verse...

But a good number of them point to God's ownership and care for the city.

Just as Yahweh has been in control of the events of the story up to this point...

So too does God have a plan for Nineveh.

God leads the people of this wicked city—

All of them, from the greatest to the least—  
 Into a posture of humble repentance.  
 Something divine has happened in this city as a result of God coming to town...  
 And it has led to a change.  
 The hero of this story is God...  
 And the result is repentance and life for the Ninevites.  
 The collision course they were on with God...  
 Has been changed by God himself.

As uncomfortable as repentance is—  
 And as unnatural as it feels—  
 It is the gift of God that leads us to life.  
 First, it is a gift that leads to *eternal life*.

The first words we hear coming out of Jesus' mouth in Mark's Gospel are:

“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:15)

Repent and believe are two words often found together in the New Testament...

Two sides of the same coin of conversion.

Sometimes it's easy to think of salvation as “I believe in Jesus, now I get into heaven...”

That's the “believe” or “trust” part.

But there is always a turning away from one thing to go toward another...”repent.”

We turn away from a life of self-reliance—

A life where we think we're good enough to earn our ticket to heaven;

We turn away from this way of living...

We give up trust in ourselves and anything else in this world...

And we turn to the Lord.

Repent and believe.

Repentance is also a gift that leads to *life today*.

In Psalm 32 David puts words to our experience:

“When I kept silent [about my sin]...”

“My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.”

When we have hidden sin—

Sin that we haven’t confessed or turned away from—

It eats at us.

It’s like a disease that slowly destroys our body.

If we neglect the prompting of the Holy Spirit to turn from our sin...

The guilt grows worse...

And the sin festers in our being—

Psychologically, spiritually, physically undoing us.

Repentance comes to us as God’s gift for life and healing now.

We no longer have to live under the weight of our sin;

We no longer have to hide it and watch it eat us from the inside out;

When we confess our sin and turn away from it...

We know that God is faithful to forgive it in Jesus Christ...

We know that it is safe to bring our sin into the light.

The Ninevites said, “*Maybe* God will relent and show us compassion if we turn from our evil ways.” (3:9)

Maybe?!

They didn’t know God as we know God.

They didn’t know about the love of God given to God’s people in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

They didn’t have full assurance of pardon like we have.

We have a complete picture of who this God is and what he wants to do.

God wants to give us life—

Not just eternal life in the future—

But life right now.

For the Christian then...

Our entire life becomes one of repentance...

Because we don't stop sinning when we become a Christian try as we may.

Rather, we know what to do with our sin now.

We acknowledge our sin before God and others—

We stop doing it—

And we believe that God has provided not just for its forgiveness...

But also, for the strength to stay turned away from it.

What a gift God has given to us!

The gift of repentance.

The gift to bring our sins into the light and turn from them...

And be healed.

Where is the Lord, in your life, leading you to repentance?

Are you willing to accept that...

And then go through the work of turning?

Find someone safe: a pastor, an elder, a friend, a teacher...

And tell them what's going on...

Take responsibility for your sin and find freedom and healing.

Repentance leads to life...

This is God's gift to us.

All praise be to God.

Amen.