



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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IS THAT YOU, GOD, CALLING?
Jonah 3:1–5, 10

I don't know about you, but I find it rather impossible to read the stories of the Bible without seeing myself reflected in them. Can you see yourself in uninvolved Jonah ... when Jonah hears: "Get up, go to Nineveh," I mean the guy sprints for Joppa ... to catch a ship heading in the opposite direction!

Jonah's determination not to get involved still has a lot of appeal among church folks today. Family frictions, an unchurched community, an educational system that seems to be breaking, millions of bellies exploding with the pain of hunger ... all Ninevehs. I would love to climb into a boat's hold, go to sleep, and avoid them all. But God is calling ... calling us to care ... calling us to make a difference! God is calling you and me to go to Nineveh ... into a world where there are no guarantees ... a world full of problems.

Back to Jonah ... there was just no escape for him. God had a plan for Jonah's life, and his going in the opposite direction of that plan made no difference to the Almighty.

The story of Jonah begins innocently enough in the Old Testament, with these few words: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh'" To us, that sounds like a fairly easy demand ... sort of like God saying "Go to Orlando," or "Go to Atlanta." But to Jonah, God's command was a curse. Nineveh was a wicked city, filled with 120,000 of the most notorious sinners on the face of the earth. Jonah HATED the Ninevites ... they were enemies to him, and now God was sending him there to call them to REPENT. What does Jonah do? No argument with God. Jonah doesn't even attempt to plead his case. He just goes in the opposite direction. Instead of going north to Nineveh, he goes south to Tarshish ... gets on tour boat, thinking God's in his rear-view mirror. Pretty absurd, huh?

In a matter of hours, a violent storm develops, and that tour boat is being tossed about like a toy. Grown men are crying, praying to various gods to save them, and then Jonah confesses. "Uh, I think this is my fault. You see, God told me to go to Nineveh, and I said 'no.'" The sailors have no choice but to throw Jonah overboard, where he is swallowed up by a specially equipped fish. Jonah has three days to think things over in the most unusual surroundings. I imagine he did a lot of praying before that fish barfed him up on shore. And even before Jonah dried out, there was God, calling Jonah again, to care enough to go to Nineveh.

And this is where we pick up the story today.

In our scripture passage, God gives Jonah a second chance ... that's what the first couple of verses tell us. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' And what does Jonah do this time? Heads directly to Nineveh!



Now every parent in this place today is processing this story through the experiences of their own children.

- ♦ "Hey, Jonah, wouldn't it have been easier to have just gone to Nineveh the first time god called you?"
- ♦ "Hey, Kerry, wouldn't it been a lot less painful if you would have cleaned your room on wednesday, instead of being grounded for three days and then doing the job?"

- ♦ “Hey, Jeremy, wouldn’t it have been easier to have studied harder before you got all those ‘c’s” and ‘d’s” so you wouldn’t be in such a hole now?”

But no such lecture from God ... God simply gives Jonah a second chance, and Jonah makes the most of it.

It’s a big city and Jonah walks a whole day to get to the city center. It’s crowded, people everywhere and he starts shouting out god’s message: “people of Nineveh, you’ve got 40 days and then god is going to destroy your city!” And amazingly, the people listened, and they believed Jonah, and all the people, from the greatest to the least, repented from their sin, even the king of Nineveh. And God saw what they did, and he changed his mind about them. They too were given a second chance.



I’m going to take a moment and give you a multiple choice test. Some of you are thinking, “Geez, I don’t need to be taking a test this morning, Terry. Just tell me what I need to know.” Well, I believe there are a few options here as to how we might interpret the underlying message of the story of Jonah, so let me give you your choices:

A. The story of Jonah being swallowed by the fish is a story about how God works miracles to help people survive the wild experiences of life.

B. The story of Jonah is about God’s grace and God’s desire to give people a second, a third ... a tenth chance in this life.

C. The point of Jonah’s story is that we are each called to be prophets ... that each of us is called to proclaim God’s loving purpose to everyone we meet so that they can know God themselves.

Which is it? A, B or C? Or ... *ALL* of the above?

Right ... all the above are viable choices as to the point of Jonah’s story: the miracle, the forgiveness, the evangelism. But there is a FOURTH possibility that I want to ask you to consider today, and it is this: I wonder if the message of Jonah’s story is that every one of us is called by God to go to some sort of Nineveh, and we are fighting it.



Our Nineveh might be a PLACE; a JOB CHANGE to a distant city and you don’t want to go. I hope I’m not overstepping my bounds here, but I remember talking with Doris and Alan York when they moved here from the Tampa area six or seven years ago. It was for a change in jobs for Doris. They had been in the Tampa area for many years, but felt this was where God might be leading them. They could have said: “I’m not going to Nineveh! No way!” But to their credit, the York’s came to Jacksonville and to the Lakewood Presbyterian Church ... you know the rest of the story! What a great move for THEM and for LPC!



Our Nineveh might not be a place ... it might be a PEOPLE. Maybe there are neighbors who moved in, or new employees that just joined the company, and they don’t seem like the type of people you want to associate with. Maybe they are people of color, or people of a different faith, or people who have obviously different lifestyles than your own. You’re simply NOT going to go over there with a plate of cookies and be the Welcome Wagon to THOSE Ninevites. But what if the whale swallows you? What if your life takes a terribly bumpy turn, and you are desperate, and the Ninevites come to you?



Or maybe our Nineveh might not be a PLACE or a PEOPLE ... our Nineveh might be an IDEA, or a WAY OF THINKING. God might be calling you to open up your mind to change your position on something controversial. You think of yourself as "principled" ... but maybe you're just stubborn! Like Jonah. Even when you think that God might be nudging you in a new direction, you can't give up the old; you can't abandon your very righteous ship. To do so would be to align yourself with the enemy ... those Ninevites! I don't need to list them all for you ... you're aware of the issues facing our country in this election year and the problems our denomination has been wrestling with for a long time. You think you hold a position on these issues, but maybe the position is holding YOU.



Or maybe Nineveh is some PERSONAL HABIT, some SECRET SIN that has crept into your life. You know that you shouldn't be doing it, that God is speaking to your heart about it ... but, you don't want to change. There's a variation of an old church camp song that says it this way:

Yield not to temptation
Although yielding is fun!

You've yielded and it has felt good. Every time God calls you to Nineveh, you get on a boat and head toward Tarshish. What would it cost you to change your lifestyle? But maybe a better, more pertinent question is: What will it cost you to stay the same? Sitting in the belly of a fish, THAT was the crossroads question for Jonah, and he chose to follow God's call to Nineveh.

Therapists say that there are only two things that can make us change our ways: one is LOVE, the other is PAIN. And if your choices today are causing you PAIN or keeping you from LOVE, then maybe it's time for you to turn around and head to Nineveh.



I enjoy reading and have just about finished a book by John Grisham, *The Testament*. It is a wonderful illustration of a life restored ... of a choice between Nineveh or Tarshish. Let me give you a brief synopsis of the story.

The book begins as seventy-eight year old Troy Phelan, an eccentric business tycoon in bad health worth eleven billion dollars, has a videotaped meeting with a panel of psychiatrists to prove that he is of sound mind. That accomplished, he signs a will that parcels out his wealth to a family of grown children and ex-wives. He has already given each of the children five million dollars on their twenty-first birthdays and the ex-wives more than that in divorce settlements. They have all squandered every cent. They now await the hundreds of millions the will promises each of them.

With psychiatrists and lawyers before him, he then produces another document, not a will, but a hand-written testament. He signs it and slides this testament to his lawyers, gets up from his wheelchair, walks to the balcony of his penthouse at the top of his tall office building, and jumps to his death.

With the video cameras still running, Phelan's lawyer and confidante, Josh Stafford, reads the testament. It cancels out all previous wills. The testament bequeaths to his adult children and ex-wives enough money to cancel their debts ... as of the day of his death. Phelan then gives the remainder of his estate to a daughter no one knows about, Rachel Lane Cunningham, whom he fathered out of wedlock.

Our hero, Nate O'Riley ... a forty-eight year old, washed-up, alcoholic lawyer, with two ruined marriages in his wake and the IRS on his tail ... is sent to the Brazilian wetlands in search of the mysterious heir named in the will. It's a last ditch effort for Nate ... his Nineveh in a real sense. After a harrowing trip upriver to a remote settlement in the Pantanal, a maze of jungle and rivers inhabited only by tribal peoples along the border of Brazil and Bolivia, he finally finds Rachel Lane, a pure-hearted missionary living with an indigenous tribe and carrying out "God's work." Rachel's dedication to God and her kindness impress the jaded lawyer so much so, that after a nasty bout of

dengue fever Nate has a vision that changes his life. Upon recovering from the fever, Nate enters a little chapel in Corumba, Brazil with the hope of finding Rachel there. She had actually visited him briefly in the hospital.

Let me read an excerpt from the book of O'Riley's vision there in the chapel:

He could wait. He had the time; she might appear. He shuffled along the back row and sat alone. He studied the crucifixion, the nails through His hands, the sword in His side, the agony in His face. Did they really kill Him in such a dreadful manner? Along the way, at some point in his miserable secular life, Nate had read or heard the basic stories of Christ; the virgin birth, thus Christmas; the walking on the water; many another miracle or two; was he swallowed by the whale or was that someone else And then the betrayal by Judas; the trial by Pilate; the crucifixion, thus Easter, and finally the ascension into heaven.

Yes, Nate knew the basics. Perhaps his mother had told him.

[Nate sat there in the chapel, listening to the music in Portuguese.]

When the song finished, a young man read some scripture and began teaching...Nate was mesmerized by the soft, slurring sounds, and the unhurried cadence. Though he understood not a word, he tried to repeat the sentences. Then his thoughts drifted.

His body had purged the fevers and the chemicals. He was well fed, alert, rested. He was his old self again, and that suddenly depressed him. The present was back, hand in hand with the future. The burdens he'd left with Rachel had found him again, found then and there in the chapel...

Nate closed his eyes...and called God's name. God was waiting.

With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list (of his life's failures), mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that had plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered to God. "Please help me."

As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean.

(The Testament by John Grisham, p. 325-326)



Well, you've been very kind in listening this morning. You always are. Our normal pattern is to respectfully listen to the sermon, sing the Closing Hymn of Commitment, hear the Benediction and then move for the doors. Today, I want to ask you to do something just a bit different ... to meditate for just a few moments. Yes, Grisham's book is only fiction and there's no real Nate O'Riley ... but then maybe there is some "Nate" in all of us, as there is "Jonah".

So take a few moments and think about where you ARE and where God is calling you to BE, what God is calling you to DO, or where God is calling you to CHANGE. And then decide to GO THERE.

This is a Holy Moment ... God is calling each of us to Nineveh. Every day a boat departs for that destination. Jonah missed it the first time around ... will you be on it or will you stay?

Amen and Amen.