

Becoming the People of God: A Second Time Jonah 3:1-5, 10
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Will we go or will we stay?

The story of Jonah begins innocently enough in the Old Testament, with these few words: “One day the Lord spoke to Jonah, son of Amittai. God said ‘Go to Nineveh.’” To us, that sounds like an easy instruction; sort of like God saying “Go to Seattle,” or “Go to Denver.” 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. Jonah does not argue with God; Jonah doesn’t 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 and thinks God is in his rear-view mirror.

How foolish. Can we ever run away from God?

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 big fish, and three days later, barfed up on shore. And this is where our First Lesson picks up the story today.

God gives Jonah a second time; that’s what the verses tell us. “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying ‘Get up and go to Nineveh and proclaim the message that I give to you.’ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh.”

Now every parent and grandparent is processing this story through the experiences of their own children.

To the prophet – “Hey, Jonah, wouldn’t it have been easier to have just gone to Nineveh the first time God spoke to you?”

To my daughter – “Hey, Sarah, 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?”

To my son – “Hey, Matt, wouldn’t it have been easier to have turned in the homework you finished before you got all those ‘D’s” and ‘F’s” so you wouldn’t be in such a hole now?”

But God gives Jonah no such lecture; he gives Jonah a second chance, and Jonah makes the most of it. He walks into the crowded city and proclaims the message that God gave to him. “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 wrong-doing, even the King of Nineveh. And God saw what they did, and he changed his mind about them. They were given a second chance.

The underlying message of the story of Jonah is multiple choice.

Choice One: for some people, they only know the part about Jonah being swallowed by the fish, and they think it's a miracle that Jonah survived that wild experience. For them it's miracle story!

Choice Two: others understand that the story is about God's grace and his desire to give sinful people second, third and tenth chances in this life. For these it's a forgiveness story.

Choice Three: still others believe that the point of Jonah's story is that we are each called to be prophets; that each is called proclaim God's loving purpose to everyone we meet so that they can know him. It's a story of evangelism.

I think all of these are good choices for what Jonah's story is about; the miracle, the forgiveness, the evangelism. Choice Four: I think there is a fourth possibility – 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. There is our second time where God speaks!

Our second time where God speaks might be a place; a job change to a distant city and you don't want to go. How many of us have resisted the move from our comfortable home to a new place? We don't want to give up this circle of friends, this network, this community. We don't want to leave St. Helens or Scappoose. We don't want to move to a new place.

Our second time where God speaks might not be a place; it might be a people. Perhaps there are neighbors who moved in, or workmates 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 help you?

Our second time where God speaks 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 with the enemy; those Ninevites! It might be your position on war, or on homosexuality, or on immigration, or on divorce, and you simply cannot change. You think you hold a position on these issues, but maybe the position is holding you.

Our second time where God speaks is some personal habit, some secret sin that has crept into life and while you sense God is calling you from it, you don't want to change.

For many, every time God calls you to head north to Nineveh, you get on a boat and head the other direction. What would it cost you to change your lifestyle? But perhaps a more pertinent question is, what will it cost you to remain the same? For Jonah 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 (melt us, mold us, fill us, use us), the other is pain. And if your choices today are causing you pain or keeping you from love, then perhaps it is time to go to your Nineveh.

Well, you've been very kind in listening this morning. You always are. Our pattern at Plymouth is to respectfully listen to the sermon, sing the hymn, and move toward the end of the service. Today, I ask you to pause. To meditate for a time, meditate on where you are and where God is calling you to be. And then decide to go there. This is a holy moment: A Second Time God is speaking each of us about our Nineveh. Will we go, or will we stay?

[Pause]

Musical Meditation

LITANY OF RESPONSE

Leader: Though often misunderstood, often held captive by fabricated realities, our souls long for peace.

All: O God, we long for your presence; we long for peace.

Leader: We run without a destination, surrounded by highways of turbulent noise. We are tired, worn, and battered, and our souls long for joy.

All: O God, we long for your presence; we long for joy.

Leader: Through it all; in it all; and around all of it—choose to love the astounding teaching of the Messiah. Look to experience peace and joy—even in the midst of disappointment, war, injustice, or poverty. Allow your soul to become acquainted with the One who changes hard challenges into opportunities for transformation and growth.

All: Peace and Joy are possible in the presence of the Savior. In spite of the world's challenges, we choose peace; we choose joy; we choose to follow YOU, Lord!