

**Jonah 3-4**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sermon Series: Bible Stories**  
**Jonah and the Ninevites - Commitment**

**Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church**  
**Winchester, VA**  
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**3:1** Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: **2** “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

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

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

**10** 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.

**4:1** But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. **2** He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. **3** Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

**4** But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

**5** Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. **6** Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. **7** But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. **8** When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

**9** But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

**10** But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. **11** And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

**Grace and peace to you from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

I'd like you to think about something for a moment. A memory, I'm not sure how far back. A memory which you probably would like to forget but has nevertheless stuck with you all this time. This memory that I'd like you to think about, is the point in your life that you are most ashamed of. It is likely the moment when you demonstrated the least amount of commitment to God and to His will. Got it? Good. Now I want you imagine how you would feel if, after the circumstances of that particular memory transpired God came to you and told you that He was going to have you write it down so that every Christian who lived for the remainder of the years allotted to this world would be able to learn from your mistake. Can you picture it? Eesh! Right? "Please Lord, never let that happen," we might think. But that's precisely what He did with many of His prophets and apostles and none more notably so than Jonah.

Our focus today is on the second half of the book of Jonah, but let's recap quickly the events of the first two chapters. **The Word of the Lord came to Jonah** telling him to **Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it** (Jon 1:1-2). But instead of complying with God, **Jonah ran away**, setting out on a ship bound for Tarshish (Jon 1:3). Then God sent a storm that threatened to capsize the ship and Jonah, realizing that this storm was a consequence of his rebellion, ordered the crew to throw him over the side into the sea. They protested at first but eventually relented and when they had thrown Jonah overboard, the raging sea grew calm (Jon 1:4-15).

Then **the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. And from inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God** (Jon 1:17 - 2:1). His prayer thanked God for his salvation in the belly of the fish and he rededicated himself to the LORD. Then **God commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land** (Jon 2:10).

Our text today picks up there. **Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."** This time, we're told, Jonah obeyed and went to Nineveh.

How similar are you and I to Jonah? Have we been called by God to minister to a "great city"? I suppose that depends a lot on what you would say makes a city "great." How big was Nineveh? Chapter 4 tells us that it was home to **more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left**. Does that refer to all of them, hinting at their spiritual immaturity. Or it's possible God was referring in that passage only to those actual children who had not yet reached the age of discretion and literally couldn't tell their left from their right, in which case the city may have been well over half a million people. In either case, it was a very large city for its time.

But the size of the city wasn't the only thing that made it "great" in the eyes of God. For Him, its greatness depended far less on the height of the walls, the circumference or diameter of its footprint, than on its contents: the living, human souls who lived there. The city of Nineveh was "great" in God's sight because it contained people, His creatures, the crown of His creation. But those people living in Nineveh were lost in the darkness of sin. Their wickedness was so great that God had decided to act. In His love He would send His servant Jonah to deliver one final message of warning—one final call to repentance—**Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown**. If they refused to listen to His servant Jonah and His Word, they would be destroyed.

When you drive home today after church today, will you be heading back to a “great” city or a “great” town? Look at the homes you drive past. Look at the cars next to you on the road. Think about all the people that those homes and cars contain. Do you think they know God? Do they have a church home? How many of them are heaven-bound because they know Jesus as their Savior? Do you ever stop to think about that, or do you just drive past without a care in the world? If statistics tell us anything, one out of every three people you see doesn’t know Jesus and isn’t in church hearing about Him. Do we care? Do we see them as God sees them? Or are we too busy, too worried, too comfortable being part of God’s family ourselves to notice?

Jonah walked into Nineveh a foreigner and enemy and preached God’s message: **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.** The Ninevites could have ignored Him or passed Him off as crazy, but thankfully they admitted what was true. God’s judgment was crashing down. The God of Heaven and Earth was righteously angry with them because of their acts of murder, their idolatry, and their corruption. They deserved nothing more than to be destroyed. But Jonah’s message also shared the compassion of God. He was giving them 40 days. It was a time of grace, a time of compassion, a time for them to recognize their sin and change.

Nineveh needed just one day. **The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 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. 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. 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. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”**

**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.**

Jonah’s reaction is a bit shocking. **He became angry. He prayed to the LORD, saying, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”**

Jonah wanted to die. He was mad at God. He was resentful of God for giving Assyria release from their sins. Jonah’s actions seem strange to us. He was so mad at God because of His compassion that he wanted to die. Essentially, Jonah was doing two things: first he was condemning God for His compassion, and second, he was manifesting his own self-righteousness.

Our lessons this morning teach us that to follow God’s Word we must leave our prejudices behind especially when it comes to our view of others. We have to commit ourselves to God and to the love that He holds for the people in this world. That’s a love that sees all people as equal, that sees all sinners as sinners for whom Christ came into this world and offered His life for their salvation.

Fortunately for us, we live in a culture where it is not acceptable to hate any one group of people. We’re culturally imprinted with the truth that all people are equal regardless of age, race, nation of origin, gender, or ability. So we may not be quite so tempted to discriminate against other nations. But we are still tempted to hate other people. In our culture, while discrimination

based on externals is publicly frowned upon, judgement based on internals like religious beliefs, political views, and social ideologies runs rampant. Are we innocent of such things? I don't think so. How many of us here are harboring anger in our hearts toward an individual or a group of people right now? Who here finds it repulsive to have to work with certain individuals or groups of people? Who here doesn't like having conversations with certain people simply because they disagree with you on certain key issues? Committing to God means we let go of all our prejudices.

From Jonah's life lesson we learn how difficult that can be. Jonah knew the violent and cruel nature of the Assyrians. He knew that they could rise up and destroy Israel at any moment. Their culture and practices were so corrupt that they would offend any Christian today. But despite all of that, did Jonah have any right to be angry with God? Did he have the right to decide that those people were not worthy of receiving salvation through the gospel?

Maybe there are individuals who have hurt you or have put obstacles before you in your walk with Jesus. Perhaps there are groups who have attacked or belittled you, individuals or groups whom we see as hypocrites or outright apostates and unbelievers. Do you have any right to carry hatred or begrudging feelings against them? Do we have any right to resent their presence here at church or to decide that they are not worthy of receiving salvation through the gospel?

If we think we do, then we need to hear God's words about Nineveh, **Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. Should I not be concerned about that great city?** God our Savior in His great love wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. It's easy enough to say, "Amen to that!" but do our actions toward all people show our commitment to that desire? God in His love sent His only begotten Son to save the world that all who believe in Him might not perish, but have eternal life. "Amen!" we say, but do our actions show our commitment to that message or do they rather reveal that we're concerned only with like-minded people?

It's easy to forget that we are same as the people we hate. It is easy to forget that we were spiritually dead just like those repulsive unbelievers we so like to look down on. It is easy to forget that it was sin that brought different languages and eventually different cultures to this world. It is equally easy to forget that the Spirit is sent to all people through the same good news that saved us. Committing ourselves to Jesus and Following Him leaves no room for prejudice. Disciples of Christ share His love with all people.

Jonah made a beautiful confession about God, albeit stemming from the anger in his heart. He said, **I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.** The Lord our God is truly gracious and compassionate. It's astounding. We pretend to know the hearts of others, but God actually does. He knows the death that lives inside us. He knows the spite, pettiness, and hatred that we harbor. He knows the prejudices we daily allow to rise up and poison our love for others. God knows the depth of the wickedness of our hearts even better than we do ourselves. That ought frighten any of us, but today it doesn't.

It doesn't, because God is gracious and compassionate. And in His grace and compassion He committed Himself to us. He came down from heaven not to condemn the world but to save us. Jesus sacrificed Himself for every person in this room. He did it for all those who aren't here, as well. He lived and died for the people we don't want to forgive, for those we don't always view as equals, for those we simply want to be angry with because of something they've done, or said, or believe. Jesus forgave them all. He even forgave you and me our self-

righteous pomp and pride which condemn God for His love. Your God is so gracious and compassionate that He forgives you every single time you fail to love someone else. He died to make you innocent of all your sins. It was no accident; it was a deliberate act of His loving commitment

If there's anything we can learn from the book of Jonah and his failures it is that God's compassion for sinful people is real. Our God is a God who wants all men to be saved. Even the most powerful and cruel nations. Even the very worst of sinners. God's commitment to us and to all the world brought Him to the cross where He laid down His life to win our salvation. In commitment to Him, our Lord and Redeemer, we now lay down our prejudices to bring the message of His cross to the world. Amen.

**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.**