

Lent 2020 – A Whale of a Fish Story
Our relationship to Others - Jonah 3:1-10

Introduction: Second time's a charm? Lo and behold, the Nineveh didn't slay the bearer of bad news. They put on a mass sackcloth. The Great City identified itself with war and violence thus the sackcloth contradicts their own self-identity. Violence is an arbitrary infringement on human rights.

History indicates the Assyrian power was waning due to coups, famines, and plagues. This explains somewhat why Nineveh listens to the prophet, these occurrences have inflicted them already. However, it doesn't explain the entirety of mass repentance (not conversion.) As with past Hebrew prophets, proclamation is made against the foreign nations for their abuses and wickedness, to repent of their evils upon victims. There is no attempt to convert them.

<p>3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.</p>	<p>The second command repeats the first command “Get up...” Three days walk – likely this is symbolic language because a typical traveler of that day walked 15-25 miles in a day. The number three is used in the Torah to mediate between <u>two</u> opposing or contradictory values. The third value mediates, reconciles, and connects the two. Three is the number of truth. According to Jewish law, once something is done three times it is considered a permanent thing. (Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David)</p> <p>Forty is likely symbolic (40 years in the wilderness, 40 days on the ark). Forty represents 4 (corners of the earth) x 10 (Completion of God's work, 10 commandments.) Forty represents renewal and completion of change. Criminals (Jesus) receive 39 lashes to bring them to the brink of atonement or change.</p> <p>Jonah enjoyed preaching the wrath, especially he says “shall be overthrown” not “might be overthrown.”</p> <p>Note the shift in language from the Hebrew covenantal and personal reference of Yahweh</p>
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<p>⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”</p> <p>¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.</p>	<p>(Lord in English) to the generic El (God in English) in v5.</p> <p>The Assyrian empire was unusually violent, enslaving, torturing, and oppressing the poor which came home to roost in the individual behavior tearing the fabric of their own society. Poison of violence spread throughout Nineveh, everyone no matter of social status participated in “evil ways.” The poor stole from the rich, the rich oppressed the poor; the middle class stole from each other. Everyone from great to small put on the sackcloth – a sign the society changes are taking place.</p> <p>Again, Nineveh does not give up its’ idols and religious practices to convert to Judaism, but relents from bringing disaster upon them because of their positive response and intention of social reform.</p> <p>Turn = Repentance</p>
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Final Thoughts: Some will preach God’s wrath without a word of justice for the oppressed, others work vehemently for justice without a peep from God’s word. Jonah’s story calls for both, inseparable from God’s wrath is God’s justice. Injustice and violence result in societal breakdown expressing God’s wrath. There are natural consequences for exploitation and greed manifested in God’s anger toward evil.

Jonah’s response might be surprising to us looking at the story today. We might say “mission accomplished.” Jonah reacts, violently.