

A Gift to Nineveh, A Gift to Us

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY [b]

January 21, 2018

JONAH 3:1-5, 10

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³ **So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth.** ⁴ **Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** ⁵ **And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.** ... ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

For an Israelite such as Jonah, Nineveh’s the wrong town.

There’s good reason why Jonah wouldn’t want to go to there. When the Lord instructed the prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah pointed himself in a different direction, boarding a ship bound for Tarshish. And that’s when the Lord ruined Jonah’s plans by bringing the storm and having Jonah swallowed by a great fish.

Then, having been spit out on dry land by the fish, Jonah went to Nineveh, which is where the Lord had instructed all along.

But there’s a reason why Jonah wouldn’t want to go to Nineveh. No Israelite would want to. Nineveh is the capitol of Assyria, the dominating nation of the world at that time, and Assyria has been terribly brutalizing Israel.

No Israelite would want to be found in Nineveh, but in Jonah’s case, the Lord wanted him to go there to

proclaim the Lord's word to save them. For Jonah, why would you want to proclaim the Lord's word to a bloodthirsty people who despised you and had brutalized your own country?

The great city of Nineveh worshipped the false gods. These are gods and goddesses who personify everything that brings fear and death to humans. These are the gods and goddesses for war, for death, for rain and flood, for wind and storm, for anything else under the sun. They make these gods and goddesses with their own hands, but then the Ninevites turn around and give sacrifices to them.

But when you have an idol as your god, there is something that is missing.

None of these gods or goddesses the Ninevites worshipped, not one of them of real, not one could forgive sins.

The promise or hope of the idol god was that you would get good rains, or good crops, or a long life, or plentiful animals, or whatever—but not one of the gods or goddesses could give you a clean and peaceful conscience.

Nineveh's chief god was the goddess Ishtar. She's the goddess of love and fertility and war and political power. If you want success in life, many children, victory over your neighbors, then sacrifice to Ishtar.

But Ishtar had never done anything to forgive sins. With the name Ishtar you could associate words such as victory, wealth, and power, but you never associate with her name the words grace or kindness or mercy.

Nineveh worshipped Ishtar, and the results were predictable. This was a city given over to sexual immorality, adultery, pursuit of wealth, and brutality against neighbor. No one would've ever said, "Let's go to Nineveh, we will find there a people generous in their gifts, overflowing in their encouragement, and never unloving or heartless."

There was no forgiveness of sins in Nineveh.

So the Lord sent Jonah.

Nineveh's problem, though, was not that they were great sinners. That belongs to every person born of human flesh. We all have in common the sinful heart, inherited from Adam. We all have in common the guilt built up from sins recent and distant, many which we do not even know. We all, as children of Adam living in this sinful world, have in common the shame that is brought upon us by the sin done to us by others.

Nineveh's real problem was not that they were great sinners. It was that they had no way to be cleansed of their sin. No way to turn *from* their idolatry and *to* the God of life. The God of grace, the Lord who loves the sinner and forgives, the God of Israel who calls you into his covenant to make you his own, they didn't know this God, for they were looking the other way, at Ishtar.

But the Lord knows them, and he loves the Ninevites. Jonah 3:1:

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

What did Jonah proclaim the Ninevites?

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

[Jonah 3:4]

That does not sound like a message of grace. But in the Hebrew, that word for *overthrown* is the word literally meaning *turned back*. It's the same word that in Psalm 30:11 is translated as "you have turned."

You [O Lord] have turned for me my sadness into dancing;

You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness.

This is the message of grace—the Lord turning the sinner from sin to grace, from sadness to dancing. It is the Lord delivering through the mouth of his prophet the Law and the Gospel—the Law, to accuse us of sin and leave us in guilt; the Gospel, to forgive our sin and stand us before God in honor.

What will be done to Nineveh will be done by the Lord. It will be his accomplishment, not theirs. He will overturn and destroy the city. That is his judgement and Law. He will turn back the Ninevites from their false confidence and turn them to look at his gift of cleansing and life. That is his grace and Gospel.

And with this strange prophet Jonah standing in the middle of their city speaking the words of this strange God who created all things and who forgives sin, hearing this message so different than what they heard from their manmade gods, the Ninevites had faith and were justified. Jonah 3:5:

And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least.

They had faith in God. It is by faith you are saved, not works. It is by faith in the Lord's Word of forgiveness that you are saved, not by any sacrifice you can make or anything you can do to merit God's favor.

It is by faith, then, that the Ninevites could know that they belonged not to the gods formed up from their own hopes and fears, but to the living God of Israel. This God did not *demand* repentance as a work the sinner must do to come to God; rather, he *gave* repentance as gift, working repentance by having his prophet preach his Law and his Gospel.

The word that comes to us, too, is *repentance*. Repentance is being turned around. It is being turned back from everything you fear of your guilt and your shame, turned back *from* pursuing your own righteousness by your own works, and being turned *to* the God who forgives your sin, cleanses your conscience, and bestows upon you his own righteousness—all as pure gift.

Repentance was the Lord's gift to the Ninevites. And it is his gift to you and me and our children.

The Lord works this gift to us by turning us completely away from him with his Law, so that fearing our own guilt and death, we are afraid to even look at his face. Then by turning us completely around with his Gospel, so that we are turned to look upon his face in the joy and confidence that he forgives our sin,

that he clothes us in the righteousness of his own Son, and that he makes us his people.

At the cross, in his own body Jesus took the sins of the Ninevites and the sins of you and me and our children, and crucified them. He is the Lord who grants us repentance and makes us his own.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.