

## Sermon Notes – January 16, 2021

### *“Parable of God’s Grace”*

(Jonah 3:1-10 - Mark 1:14-20)

This morning I want to talk a little bit about the Old Testament scripture, Jonah 3:1-10. Jonah is a short book in the Old Testament with only four chapters, and I hope that you will go back and read it when you get a chance. It is a very powerful parable of God’s grace. I would like to start out with a cartoon that came out a few years ago that Gary Larson created called “The Far Side.” This cartoon runs in the newspaper. In the cartoon, Gary had a man standing at the door; bearded, dripping wet, and his clothes were in shreds. The man was knocking on the door. The man’s wife answers the door, looks at her disheveled husband in disgust, and says, “For crying out loud, Jonah! You are three days late, covered in slime, and smelling like fish. What kind of story have you got for me to swallow today?” Well, swallowing the story of Jonah may be hard for some of you, but I want you to know that it’s one of the most powerful stories (parables) of God’s grace. I want you to ponder today how often we are like Jonah, and who are our Ninevites?

Jonah was God’s prophet for the nation of Israel. God called him to go to the people of Nineveh and to proclaim to them, “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown. They will be no more.” ***Jonah was commanded by God to preach bad news for the Ninevites, and he didn’t want to go.*** Why was he so reluctant? *Number one, he was a Jewish prophet and they were Jewish prophets to the kingdom of Israel only, so he believed. Number two, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and the Assyrians were the enemies of the Israelites.* The Israelites believed that all nations were out to kill them. So Jonah didn’t want to go because they were his enemies and he thought he was going beyond the bounds of his religion. But, God had called him to go to Nineveh, and he didn’t want to go.

Has God ever asked you to do something that you really didn’t want to do – and you avoided it, ignored it, or ran away from it? I felt the call to go into the ministry when I was fourteen years of age – some kind of

ministry, whether it was a missionary, a minister, or whatever. When I got to college, I enrolled into religion as my major. While I was there, I changed my major three or four times. Do you know why? ... *Because I thought God called ministers who were perfect - and if He expected perfection from me, He could forget it.* I felt like I needed to change to a teacher or something else. At the end of my sophomore year, I had to declare my major; so, I went to see my advisor and I told him that I was going back into religion. He told me to sit down and explain. I told him that I would not be happy and at peace until I did what God wanted me to do.

Jonah was a reluctant prophet. He didn't want to go to Nineveh. These Ninevites were his enemies. They were people that hurt Israelites. The Assyrians were known to be ruthless in punishing their enemies and Jonah had family members that were killed and tortured by the Assyrians. He hated the Ninevites. (Note Jonah's reaction to the Ninevites.) You remember that I said we have our own Ninevites - and I want you to think about who yours are? Who are those persons who are hard for you to forgive and to care for as God would have you to do? Listen to the story of Dr. Paul Cho.

Dr. Paul Cho, a Korean pastor of the largest church in the world, was a Buddhist until age 17. Then he became a Christian. As he won international claim as a pastor, he gets invited to Japan to speak to a group of Japanese pastors (1,000 pastors). He accepted the invitation, reluctantly. Dr. Cho hated the Japanese for what they had done to Korea and even members of his own family during the war. He didn't want to go, but he felt that was what God wanted him to do. When he stood up in front of the audience, guess what he said? ... He looked at all those Japanese pastors and he said, "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" and then he broke down into tears and wept. A Japanese pastor stood up in the audience and said, "Dr. Cho, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what we, as Japanese, did to the Koreans and to your family during the war." Another pastor stood, and another, and another, until all 1,000 pastors were standing. Dr. Cho stopped his tears and stood up. He said, "Please

forgive me for my hatred. God loves you and I must love you too, as God's child." Dr. Cho's "Ninevites" were the Japanese.

**If you read chapters one and two of Jonah, you will find out that he got on a ship and took off to get as far away from God as he could get. He thought he could escape from God's presence.** He got on the ship and headed to Tarshish, which is in modern day Spain. While he was on the ship, a big storm arose. He was sleeping in the cabin of the ship and all the sailors were praying to their gods to save them from the storm. They went and woke up Jonah and told him to pray to his God -- "maybe your God can save us from dying in this storm." Jonah said, "If you will just throw me overboard, the sea will calm down and you all will be okay. It is all my fault. I disobeyed God."

Finally, the storm got worse and the sailors were so upset that they threw Jonah into the sea. Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Now I don't know if you want to believe that he was swallowed by a whale or not, but I want you to consider two things: Number one, Jesus was one time asked by the Pharisees and the Saducees to give them a sign that He was who He said He was. ***Jesus said, "No sign shall be given to you other than this -- Jonah rose from the belly of the whale in three days - and the Son of Man will rise from the tomb in three days."***

Then secondly, I want to tell you a true story about a British sailor, James Bartley who was on a whaling ship, looking for whales in 1891. A whale turned on the ship and attacked it. It hit the ship so hard that a sailor flew out and was swallowed by the whale. Supposedly, he stayed in that whale for two days. The whale was harpooned, killed, and they cut that man out of the whale's stomach. The man survived. But guess what? ... He was blind for the rest of his life and supposedly his skin was bleached white by the gastric juices in the whale's stomach. But, he lived for eighteen years -- from 1891 to 1909. That story is told as true, but there are some that still don't believe it.

***What I'm telling you, whether you believe it's true or not is that the book of Jonah is a powerful parable of God's grace.*** Jonah ran from

God; he didn't want to do what God asked him. They threw him over and he was swallowed by the whale. He spent three days in that whale. He did some soul-searching, don't you reckon? *Have you ever been caught in a bad situation and you've made promises to God? ... "God, if you just get me out of this, I'll do so-and-so."* Have you ever noticed that we can change our actions after a traumatic experience, but we don't always change our hearts or our attitudes? But some people are changed in their heart and their actions though, aren't they? **(If we only change our actions, but our heart and our attitude aren't transformed, those actions won't last - they will stop pretty shortly.)**

Listen to the story of John:

John (a married man with two kids) was very wealthy, had a good job, lots of money, and lot of possessions. He and his wife went to Savannah, Georgia on vacation. One morning, he got up early to go swimming before the others got up. He was swimming and got hit by a big wave. It knocked him unconscious for a few seconds. When he woke up, he was face-down in the water on the shoreline. He couldn't move for some reason. A little boy saw it happen and he ran to his parents. "Mom, Dad, come quick! There's a man drowning!" The dad told him to go play and let the lifeguard take care of it. The boy said there was no lifeguard and grabbed his Dad's hand. The little boy led his dad over to the man. The Dad yelled to his wife, "Call 9-1-1." He pulled the man out of the water and he started CPR on him until the EMTs got there. They took John to the hospital, where he stayed on a ventilator for a couple of days. He went through rehab and he survived this accident. He went back home eventually and went back to his job. John said, "That traumatic, horrendous experience changed my life. I realized how precious life is and I started taking my family more seriously and I put my priority on them. It changed my relationship with God and I started going back to church. My values and my attitude changed. I wish this had happened twenty-years before. Not that I wish it back, just that I am so thankful for that experience because it changed my life, my priorities, and my actions." You see, when God changes our hearts and our attitudes, our actions will reflect it and it will last.

The whale spit Jonah out on the Mediterranean Sea shore. God forgave him and was gracious. He gave Jonah the same calling again - "Jonah, get up, go to Nineveh, and tell them what I tell you." He was a man of action. He promised God he would do it, and he did. He went to Nineveh. He probably had the shortest sermon that any preacher ever had - "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." *He went preaching bad news, and hoping that God would not be gracious and forgive them. He preached, the people received the message, believed, and they repented! God forgave them and God relented his calamity to them.* Jonah thought, "I can't believe you did that, God, but I knew you would. I knew you were merciful and compassionate. You are slow to anger and bounding in love. I knew you would relent of that calamity to them." He got angry and went off to sulk on a hillside. He said, "God, I knew you'd do that." Jonah didn't like the ways of God, so he sat there pouting. It was Thomas Carlyle, the great British historian and philosopher that said, "Jonah stalked himself under that shaded seat and waited for God to come to his way of thinking," and Carlyle went on to say, "And God waits on a hosts of Jonahs (you and me) to change and come to his way of love." *Jonah wanted God to come to his way of thinking, but God waits on us to come to his way of loving.* At the end of the story, God had provided a plant to shade Jonah from the scorching sun. The next day, He provided a worm to eat that plant, and it died. Jonah got mad. God came to Jonah with a question. He asked, "Jonah, are you mad because I let that plant die?" Jonah responded with, "Yes. I just want to die. I knew you weren't going to do what you said. You relented. You forgave those people." God looks at Jonah, and says, "Jonah, you cared about that plant that you didn't nurture and grow. Am I not to care for 120,000 Ninevites who don't know their right hand from their left hand?"

At the end of the story, we don't know if Jonah ever changed his mind. Did he ever come to God's way of loving and caring for others? You see, in the story, God is a loving and gracious and forgiving God, and He forgives those who sincerely repent and turn to Him. God loves ALL people -- even our enemies. And God calls us to be gracious. How much are we like Jonah? William Neil of Harper's Bible Commentary, who is a scholar said, "Jonah is the man who is an embodiment of intolerance and

bigotry and a lack of human sympathy.” Have you ever met anybody like that? I know this: Jonah was hard-headed and stubborn and some of us can be just as hard-headed and stubborn – and I include myself in that.

But God calls us to another way of loving, living, and caring. God was gracious to Jonah. He had already run from Him and disobeyed Him the first time, but God gave him a second chance. He was hoping that Jonah would see that God could forgive Nineveh if they would repent and ask for forgiveness too. God is a God of grace and mercy. ***I am so thankful that He is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, and He forgives when we sincerely repent.*** God loves and cares for all people, including our enemies and He wants us to grow in caring for others different from us – whether it’s people of a different race, different nationality, or whether it’s a person who has hurt us. May God help us to grow in being gracious and merciful. Amen.