

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Jonah 3:1-10

Sermon Title: "Nobody Is Exempt from Sackcloth and Fasting" (In the Belly of a Whale Lenten Series)

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Jonah is finally listening. He is finally being the prophet that God calls him to be.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah in Chapter 1, and the words were, "Go to Nineveh and preach against it, for their sins are great." Jonah refused to share such a word and took off. Now in Chapter 3 the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time: "Go to Nineveh and preach against it, for their sins are great." Jonah is the position to listen. He doesn't want to run anymore. He doesn't want another whale finding him on the sea and swallowing him up for six days or more. Jonah is right there, right outside Nineveh, and so he has work to do.

Nineveh is a huge city. Some historians believe that it would take three days to walk from one end of the city to the other. Los Angeles County comes to mind, which covers an area of over 4700 square miles. Some historians believe that it would take Jonah three days to visit every corner of the city in order to proclaim his message.¹ In either case, Jonah has a lot

¹ James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, cf. 90.

of work to do, whether it takes him three days or more to do it. And he does it. He is faithful to the call. “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” he cries. Everybody gets the message. Not one person has missed what Jonah has said. Jonah gets the credit for being a prophet of God who obeys the Lord (eventually) and provides the opportunity for people to live again.

But then in the middle of Chapter 3, the story shifts focus. The main character is not Jonah but the citizens of Nineveh, its people and king. Verse 5 is where the shift begins, “So the people of Nineveh believed God.” They *believe* God’s word on the first day of Jonah’s visit! It doesn’t take three days for Jonah to proclaim the entire message – the people get it on Day One.² They proclaim a fast. They put on sackcloth “from the greatest to the least.”

Everybody chooses to obey God. Everybody “from the greatest to the least.” They see the sin surrounding them. They are awakened and their eyes are opened to the sin residing in their own hearts. Everybody is shocked. They are humiliated. They do not like what they see. They choose to obey the word of the Lord.

Putting on sackcloth and fasting is the age-old way

² Note in verse 4 that Jonah enters the city on Day One and proclaims the message of God’s judgment. The next verse says that the people believe God, so it is assumed they started believing right on the first day.

of showing that one is truly sorry for his or her sins. Sackcloth is made of goat hair, so it is very thick and rough. It is like wearing a burlap sack: itchy and uncomfortable. A person wears sackcloth to symbolize that he or she rejects earthly comforts. He or she turns away from all comforts that make him or her complacent and ignorant of God's will.³ A person also fasts to further demonstrate that he or she is giving up simple things in order to seek God's mercy. When a person is not eating, he or she has other things to focus on, namely God. The people of Nineveh go all out. They are truly sorry for what they have done.

Even the king gets involved. He is humiliated by his own sin, and the sin that has taken over his city. He is so embarrassed that he decrees that nobody, absolutely nobody, may wear any clothing other than sackcloth, and absolutely nobody is allowed eat or drink a single thing. Even the animals are affected by this decree – they will go hungry for a time. “Who can tell if God will turn and relent,” the king of Nineveh asks. “Who can say if God will turn away from his fierce anger and choose not to let us perish?”⁴ The king takes no chances. No living thing is to make a false move, until the time for repentance is over.

³ Baker, Alexander, and Waltke, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, cf. 134-135; and James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, cf. 91.

⁴ Jonah 3:9.

God sees their works. He is touched by their sackcloth and fasting, even for the animals. God relents. The people and king and animals of Nineveh will live to see many more days.

What would it be like if all of Atlanta did as Nineveh did? What would happen if Kasim Reed, the mayor of Atlanta, got a message from a prophet of God, and he was so moved by that message that he goes on TV, and decrees that everybody, EVERYBODY, must stop eating and drinking in order to repent of their sin? Not one person, no matter what their beliefs are, no matter what their social status is, may wear suits and ties or short shirts and blouses, but they must put on itchy sackcloth to show they are truly sorry for their sins. Geographically, Nineveh was much larger than Atlanta, so how were they different from us? How are our sins any different from theirs? God got a city larger than Atlanta to repent, so it could happen to our modern city.

Everybody would have to repent of their sin, everybody, not just those who appear to be sinful. Not just those we deem to be sinful, and yet we are so righteous in our sight. Not just those who disagree with us, and so they must be wrong, and so they must be sinners. Notice that in Jonah 3, all the people of

Nineveh proclaimed a fast from the greatest to the least. It is a remarkable event. People aren't pointing fingers and saying, "You repent;" "No, you repent." They are all in the same boat. The king with all his majesty and riches sees the darkness in his heart and chooses to repent. The fact that he is a king and that he might believe his royalty comes from God makes no difference. He is not exempt by any decree. He sees his sin and wants to remove himself from it.

Everybody sees their sin and wants to remove themselves from it, too. Before the king can make his city-wide decree, every person is already putting on sackcloth and fasting. They do not point the finger at others and say, "Look how sinful you are. You are a disgrace. You should wear sackcloth and fast." They see the darkness within. They are humiliated by how they themselves how sunk so low. They point the finger only at themselves, and humbly repent, and ask mercy from God.

Political office doesn't exempt the king or his nobles. Large amounts of wealth do not save businessmen and landowners. Regular church going doesn't allow people to overlook this city-wide act of repentance. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory

of God,” Paul tells the Romans.⁵ There is no distinction.

Some of you have heard about my family’s adventure to California after Christmas last year. I wanted to finally see the Tournament of Roses parade live – it was on my bucket list. So my family flew to visit Tamara’s parents in Pasadena, and at 5:30am we awoke on January 1 and traveled by train to the parade route.

You will never see this on TV, but there are things that happen on the parade route before the actually parade starts. Some people run the parade route as a mini-marathon. Some people sell goodies to children along the route. And some carry signs down the route to warn us of our impending doom. There was a group of three or four men who were carrying large signs that looked as though they had just drawn them that morning. The one sign said, “God Kills Repent.” The other sign said, “Jesus Caused 9/11.” Now, the second sign I didn’t see. My daughter Amanda saw that one, and I had to address the issue with her. Not many people responded to those signs positively. I could hear some booing and jeering around me.

But then I was thinking of Jonah, walking up and down the streets of Nineveh, proclaiming, “Yet 40 days,

⁵ Romans 3:23.

and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” His message was in people’s faces. His message was abrupt and shocking. And people listened. They heard the message, and believed God was calling his city back to faithfulness.

I am not saying that people at the Tournament of Roses parade should have read those two signs and believed what was written. What I am asking is, did those three or four men truly wish for people to repent? Did they really think they might get some in the crowds to fast and put on sackcloth? Let us say that God was truly calling everybody on that parade route to repent of their sin,... let us say that God wanted all of us to start the new year with humble reflection, would those three or four men have repented as well? Would they have seen the sin within themselves (whatever their sin is) and have been humiliated by it, or would they have been handing out the sackcloth, saying, “I told you so, you worthless sinners”?

“There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Nobody is exempt. And there is a beauty in this. The beauty of what happened in Nineveh is this: we are all equally sinful in the sight of God, *and* we all have an equal chance to repent from our sin and turn back to God. We all may

be exempt from sin – excused, released from our darkness – by the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁶ From the greatest to the least, transformation may come.

Lent gives us the unique opportunity to look at ourselves, really look at ourselves. This is our chance to assume nothing. Good works and good words and good living do not save us. Only Christ. We need his righteousness. We need his redemption, his power to pay for our sin and cancel it out.

So it is time to let go of the assumptions like the young rich fool did, taking for granted that he would inherit God's kingdom because he was so perfect in his own sight.⁷ We forget about what we have done in the past, assuming that we are already good with God. We do not dwell on the sins of others – stop worrying about how they have to repent. Look to ourselves. Look inside first. See how separated we are from God, how we may have taken God for granted, and our salvation in God too. See God as the Object of our desires, the Center of our lives. If necessary put on sackcloth and deny ourselves material things. If needed, fast so we might pay more attention to our Lord. Look for God to come with his saving grace. Look for God to change our frailty to strength, picking

⁶ Romans 3:23, again.

⁷ Matthew 19:16-26.

us up from the ground and giving us the energy to move forward. As our sins are forgiven, we may share that wonderful message with others: they too may turn to God at any time, lay themselves bare before God, and receive forgiveness.

In Nineveh nobody assumed anything. They gave up everything. God changed that city around.

One last thing we have to consider, one more disturbing thing about Chapter 3. Everybody in the city of Nineveh repented, right? The rich and the poor, the young and the old, females and males, those who thought themselves righteous and those who did not. Everybody. Including Jonah, right? Did Jonah repent, since he too was in the city? The king's decree must have included him, even though he was a visitor, even though he was the bearer of God's word.

Jonah asked forgiveness for running away from God while traveling in the belly of a whale, but Jonah was not asking forgiveness for another sin he was not willing to let go. He held onto that sin, so much so that it gave him justification for remain angry toward the Ninevites. As we will discover next Sunday, that one sin stole all the joy from the great ministry he had accomplished.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News! The saying is sure and worthy of our full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be dead to sin and be alive in Christ. Friends, in the name of Jesus Christ, you and I are forgiven! Amen.