

# A Lesson in Repentance

Third Sunday in Epiphany—January 24, 2021  
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania  
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## Jonah 3

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

*And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then 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. Human 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. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." When 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.*

## Matthew 12:38-41

*Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!"*

We are presently in a season of repentance. Not only is Lent coming, but already we have had many readings of John the Baptist whose ministry was built upon the

message of repenting in preparation for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. And while John is the one known for the message of repentance, we must remember that this was also a strong theme of our Lord's as he began his ministry with a call to repent. We often look at John and Jesus as being like a "Good Cop—Bad Cop" team with John as the heavy and with Jesus offering only a message of love, but look again! Jesus stressed repentance just as John did.

Repentance should be a major part of the believer's life, and the topic is always worthy of our study. Today's Old Testament lesson is from the brief book of the prophet Jonah, and includes a most interesting account of repentance and of the failure to repent. I commend this book to all of you as its four chapters can be read in just a few minutes, and its message is a powerful one. We too easily think of Jonah as only a children's story, but look again! Here we find a bold and relevant message for all, as well as a little humor as Jonah's behaviors are occasionally laughable.

Jonah is an interesting character, and is also the only prophet to which our Lord directly compared himself. The Matthew 12:38-41 reading has been included in our bulletin, and in this exchange with the religious leaders Jesus presents quite a sermon on Jonah. They had challenged Jesus to show them a miraculous sign to prove that he was the Messiah, and he responded that the only sign they would receive would be the sign of Jonah. Jonah spent three days in the belly of a great fish yet miraculously survived. In a similar way Jesus would spend three days in the grave and yet be raised to life. There were other similarities between the two. Jonah was from Galilee and grew up in a town just a few miles from Nazareth. Undoubtedly Jesus grew up hearing the story of Jonah and must have visited his home town many times. Jesus grew up thinking of Jonah.

Jonah was what we call a Christ figure, one who was an example of the Messiah who was to come. Many are offended when they think of someone like Jonah being a Christ figure, since Jonah was shown to be a bitter and bigoted person, and this is *not* a fair representation of our Lord. But one can be an example or prediction of Jesus without being sinless as he was. I have shocked people in the past to explain that Samson was a Christ figure in a number of ways. He was betrayed by his beloved, and was triumphant through his death, and the same can be said of our Lord. Yes, Samson was a womanizer and ruffian, but this does not erase the ways in which he foreshadowed Jesus.

What is often overlooked is that like Jesus, Jonah presented a message of life to the wider world, and not just to the Jews. Like Elijah just before him who ministered to the Sidonians as well as Israel, and like Elisha who ministered to the Syrians, Jonah had a message for the Ninevites. Jonah preached a message of salvation which reached beyond the boundaries of Israel. We are also keenly aware that this outreach to the nations was very difficult for Jonah to accept, hence his running away from God

at his initial call, and his profound disappointment when the Ninevites were not destroyed by God's anger.

The book tells a story of repentance, but it is a strange story of mixed responses—of a nation which wholeheartedly turned away from evil and toward God, and of another nation which seemed to think themselves above such practice. Jonah preached a warning of harsh judgment to the Ninevites, and they repented! From the common people, to the king on his throne, to even the animals of that kingdom—they humbled themselves, confessed their wickedness and turned to God for mercy. This wicked nation's repentance is a glad surprise, but even more surprising is Jonah's response. He was crushed by disappointment as he had longed to see this great city destroyed. He even prepared himself a front row seat from which he could watch it all happen. The brief book ends with Jonah's deep disappointment and the Lord's plea with the prophet to be more compassionate to these people.

The Book of Jonah is, among other things, a lesson in repentance. One could say that it is a "How-To" book. The story starts with a truly evil nation. Nineveh, the capital of the great Assyrian empire, was notorious for its cruelty in their conquest and mistreatment of the surrounding nations. The Babylonians were later known from their taking Judah into exile, and eventually returning them to their land. The Assyrians were not so kind, and fifty years later when they destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel they killed and scattered the people in such a way that few would ever return. The Lord's message was brief and bold: *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* The message connected with the hearts and spirits of the people of this great and evil city! We are told that the people, the king, and even the animals were led to fasting and prayer. They realized their wickedness and pleaded for God's mercy, which was graciously given.

It is startling to hear of such repentance as we think of the wicked as being hard-hearted and unbending, and this is often true. Yet the sinful are often very much aware of their sinfulness. It is always interesting to minister among those who have fallen into great wickedness or have felt the power of evil. The prisoner, the addict, the poor and the downtrodden are often deeply aware of their spiritual state. Their greater problem is their not knowing how to escape that trap of sin. On the other hand, the "good people," those who pay their bills and are good to their families, are the hardest to reach with the message of repentance. They think of themselves as good people who do not need to change. Indeed, we are not as wicked as the criminals of the world, but there may still be a need to change, and this need is generally not taken seriously.

The results of Jonah's preaching were strange and a bit disturbing. Before I go any farther, I should clarify a matter of confusion which often occurs when Jonah's story is read from older translations. The King James Version speaks of God "repenting of the evil" which He had planned for Nineveh, and both these words can be misleading.

The term “repent” is usually thought of as a matter of turning away from evil and toward God and goodness, but in older usage repent can have a morally neutral meaning. In other words, God did not need to repent of any evil which he had done. God had simply changed His mind in response to Nineveh’s plea for mercy. God did change His mind regarding the “evil” he had planned, and this too needs some explaining. Evil usually means a sinful and wicked act, but in earlier usage it could mean a terrible and unpleasant thing. God mercifully decided not to inflict the terrible though justifiable judgment which He had originally planned. Nineveh was spared judgment, and Jonah went into a deep depression.

So here we see a lesson in repentance. The people of Nineveh, who were well aware of their own wickedness, heard a word of judgment and took it very seriously. They took it as coming from God. They responded. They changed their ways, at least for a while, and God spared them. This is a sweet lesson, but there is another less pleasant lesson in this book which makes it clear how we are to *not* respond to the call to repentance.

In the book of Jonah, we find Israel’s disbelief on display, as this prophet demonstrated the kind of faithless attitude which would eventually prove to be that nation’s undoing. Jonah was a hard-hearted prophet from a hard-hearted nation. Israel did not think of themselves as such a country. They would be quick to report that they were keepers of God’s law. The temple and religious rituals of their faith were being kept with great diligence. They could readily point to the evils done by the surrounding nations. They also knew that they were a chosen nation as God had called them as His own special people. They were convinced that they were the good people, and as good people they felt little or no need to examine themselves and to ask God for mercy. In time this would prove their undoing.

In a strange twist of the story, Nineveh shows itself to be the good example, and Jonah of Israel proves himself to be out of step with God. Where does all this leave us? How are we doing as a repentant nation? Are we hearing the message of repentance, whether it be from John the Baptist, from Jesus or from Jonah? Presently we find our nation in a time of turmoil as political differences have unsettled us, and the pandemic continues to keep us in fear. Have we ever considered this to be a call to self-examination and repentance? Most pastor’s worship books include prayers for time of national crisis. Traditionally these prayers call for God’s mercy and deliverance through the time of trial, and each of these prayers also includes a call to repentance. These prayers do not assume that the troubles were necessarily brought on by a great national sin, but they do urge us to seriously consider that as a real possibility! In this long and painful trial, have we truly fallen down before God and pleaded His mercy? And have we sincerely pleaded to God that He show us the ways that we may have strayed from the path of righteousness? I have heard many prayers aimed at political enemies which presume that the nation’s problems are “those people’s” fault, but have we really examined our own hearts, considered how we need to be a more

righteous nation, and asked God for mercy? Even in times like these we are quick to presume that we are good people who need not spend much time in serious self-examination and in asking God for mercy.

Jonah needed to see the Ninevites as people much like himself. They were indeed a more wicked nation than Israel, but they were still human beings like all of us, guilty of sin and in need of God's forgiveness. Jonah could not bring himself to a point of his own repentance, and neither could the nation of Israel, and this would prove their downfall.

The story of Jonah is an open-ended story. As the narrative closes, Jonah is disappointed in Nineveh being spared, and God is pleading for him to have a more merciful heart. It ends much as the Parable of the Prodigal Son ends, with God pleading with the older, more righteous son, to forgive his younger brother and to join the celebration. Repentance can be a difficult business, and it is much easier to tell ourselves that we are good people. But there is a great reward in repentance and cultivating a merciful heart. God was calling Jonah to experience His love, and the Father was pleading that his older son join the party. Repentance, eventually, leads to joy. Let us not miss the celebration.