

Questionable Characters

Jonah 3

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Good Morning! It's good to be back, I was gone last week on my first Junior High Retreat, and thankfully everybody survived; including me. So it's good to be back.

So we've been talking about the book of Jonah. Going through it and asking ourselves what this has to do with the church now, and our mission here. Now I want to take a recap and look at the book as sort of a whole before we go into the 3rd chapter, which is what we're going to be covering today.

Basically the book begins with 'and the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai saying...' This is what we might call the prophetic formula; a prophet would introduce himself in a way very similar to this. All this means for us today is that the instant you hear, 'and the word of the Lord came to' insert some person here, our first thought is okay, we've got a prophet. God is speaking, He's going to say something, He's going to give this person a message, and they are going to execute that message and that command.

Obviously not the case with Jonah. God says go to Nineveh, their violence, their evil has come before me. Jonah says, "not quite, I'm going the opposite direction." So he runs, he gets on a boat and he starts sailing. God sends a storm to get Jonah's attention - He gets Jonah's attention along with the sailors whose lives are in danger because of the storm. They try to row back and they realize that it's Jonah's fault that there's this storm. It doesn't work; Jonah's tossed off the boat and the storm calms.

So we have an interesting scene there where the sailors are having some sort of a conversion experience, while Jonah's kind of treading water and floating along.

At the end of chapter 1 going into chapter 2, Jonah gets swallowed by some kind of large fish, and it is at that point that he hits rock bottom, or fish bottom, or however you want to say it. He decides maybe he hasn't made the best choices in life and prays that God will restore him and forgive him, which of course happens.

Now this brings us to chapter 3. Now the big question that would be on the minds of the people who are mostly contemporary with Jonah, is that if Jonah is going to go to Nineveh and tell them the message that God gave him, the big question is what are the Ninevites going to do about it? So that's going to be floating in the back of their minds if they hadn't already heard the story before.

Now when we jump into chapter 3 we have the same word, at least in the original language, (sometimes it's translated a little bit different), as the way the entire book began in chapter 1. "And the word of the Lord came to Jonah." Now there's kind of

aside there or parenthesis or commas in the 3rd chapter where it says, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Which I might translate that as, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, that idiot," but it begins all the same. We have the introduction of a prophet, and so the question is this time not what is he going to do about it, but what are the Ninevites going to do about the message that God has to give?

Now there's a historical background here that I know Pastor Hal touched on a little bit when we went over chapter 1 a couple of weeks ago. But I want to go into it in a little bit of detail because it says something about what is taking place. Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrian empire. Beginning in 1824 BC we've got this dark green area that is the area of the Assyrian empire. Nineveh is the little blue box a little bit higher. Judah and Jerusalem a little bit north, that's where Jonah would have been from. Between 824 and 671 BC the Assyrian empire starts spreading like crazy. It's kind of hard to establish a precise date for Jonah, but we can ballpark it a little bit; Jonah would have been sent to Nineveh around the time the empire really started to expand. Assyria had a policy of expansion in that when they basically conquer a nation, they developed a system of subduing. This involved taking a good chunk of that ethnic population and deporting it and spreading it all across the empire. As it turns out you're much less likely to cause trouble if you have no ethnic or linguistic or even religious identity with the people around you. It's kind of a cruel way of executing psychological warfare, in a sense. Now their method of deporting the people is even worse. They would line groups up and the person in the person in the front would have a hook through his nose. That hook would have a chain to it which is attached to the belt of the person behind them; they would have a hook through their nose with a chain going to the person behind them and off the march. If they started to run, I think you'd re-think that very quickly because not only are you going to tear your nose, you're going to tear your sister's or your cousin's or your neighbor's nose behind you. It's sort of that cruel, inhumane, violent kind of nature that probably irritated God to begin with.

In the city of Nineveh, the capital city, you'd have propaganda. This I believe is from the palace of Tiglath-Pileser II, who is probably the Assyrian king or an Assyrian emperor I think just before Jonah. You've got images of some soldiers marching people off, this would have been near the palace of the king if not in it, and this would be kind of like a big poster telling the people of Nineveh and any visitors this is who we are and this is what we're about. It's kind of hard to see in that light actually, but there are two men laying horizontally going like this. The scholars are pretty sure that those men are being tacked to the ground or shackled and skinned alive. This is the environment Jonah is asked to go and deliver the message in Nineveh. That was in Nineveh!

You can see that when God says the violence of the Assyrians or the Ninevites has really irritated Me or come up before Me, He was not exaggerating. It's kind of an interesting side note but Assyria was probably, I think, only one-upped in terms of violence and cruelty by one other empire; that would be the Roman Empire. Very interesting.

So Jonah gets there and he gives a sermon, yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be

overthrown. In Hebrew, the original language, this is five words. Now I realize that if either Pastor Hal or myself got a sermon that consisted of five words, people would applaud and we'd probably get a standing ovation. But it's a least sort of conceivable because you have some context; you know roughly what we're going to say. People of Nineveh had no idea, they certainly would not have known who Jonah was, they would not necessarily have even known where Israel was or who Yahweh, their God, was. Now personally I think, because it's so short and because of the way it's situated, the point is not to place much emphasis on this. It's almost like Jonah gave a sermon, he delivered the message of Yahweh. I don't think we should focus too much about that because immediately once Jonah goes into Nineveh, and he's seeing things like that, the question comes - what are they going to do and what is God going to do?

So they get this message and they repent. This would have been a real shocking, ironic move. Like some of the most violent people in the world repent. They put on sackcloth, they fast, all signs of mourning and repentance. They respond to the message that Jonah had given them from God. Now to push that even further, the king in Nineveh gets word, and makes this public policy, everybody put on sackcloth, fast, and then he says, "Who knows, God may relent and turn from this fierce anger so that we may not perish." This was not a rhetorical question going *who knows but we all know He's going to*.

The near east had the ideas that the gods were, interestingly enough, a lot like them - violent, unforgiving, whimsical. There are stories where the gods decided they were mad at everyone and so they killed a whole bunch of people. They were either mad or it was for sport. And then they regretted it because no one was alive to give them sacrifices. This was kind of the religious environment that this king is coming out of. So he's saying who knows? I don't know, we might be destroyed. Now because ironically, I had no idea this was going to happen, it was in the reading we know the punch line. And I think this is the climactic statement for the book of Jonah. That God sees that they repent, and He does not bring the destruction that He said He would do.

Now if you are an Israelite, one of the ten northern tribes of Israel, or one of the two tribes of the south, and you're reading this after the year 722 BC, this is going to be offensive. 722 BC the Assyrian empire comes in and whacks Israel and subdues Judah. Israel ceases to exist because of the Assyrians. And in Jonah chapter 3, verse 10, God forgives them; people that did this. That would celebrate the skinning alive of fellow human beings - they repent and they're forgiven. We have a scandal on our hands; God is scandalous.

We also see that, interestingly enough, with Jesus, that in His ministry He catches a lot of flack from some of the other religious leaders because He starts out hanging out with people like tax collectors, who have sold out to the Roman empire, and are basically fleecing their own people and pocketing a good chunk. Jesus spends time with hookers and He starts teaching that the Kingdom of God is for these people. Now it's interesting but not a coincidence because you see Jesus taking on a lot of the roles that Yahweh of the Old Testament filled as well. There's a very non-accidental continuity. Jesus invites all these questionable characters to get involved in the Kingdom of God, and He does

not apologize over it, He offers them His forgiveness.

Now the church today, 2009, January 25th in Redwood City, the message is the same. And the scandal is not that God forgives Assyrians, not that God forgives tax collectors, liars, thieves and hookers; it's that God forgives doctors, lawyers, contractors, teachers, mechanics, housewives, children, mothers, fathers, cousins, aunts, uncles. The scandal is that God forgives you and that He forgives me. Now I'm not quite as violent as the Assyrians, but I know that deep down within my heart, and deep down in the dark places of my mind, I know there are things buried there that would appall you. And there are things deep down inside of you that would appall the rest of us. The scandal first off is that God extends and brings His forgiveness to us.

In the years after I was diagnosed with leukemia, I have ridden that line between being a patient and a survivor, and I've noticed something about a connection that developed for survivors of cancer. Is that most of the time we all have this kind of understanding that we don't really deserve to be here, it's not my right to live because I shouldn't. I should have made my wife a widow about the age of 23. And yet by multiple graces far outside of my control, here I am. And by God's grace way out of our control, we are here; that the Kingdom of God is for people like us. That this Jesus who spent time ministering to the dregs of society, both economically and socially, also died for them. And His resurrection defeated the death that will take us all.

Now for us and for the church there's a response involved in this, and it's not the response that I see quite a bit in culture. If you meet a couple or family and they have you over for dinner, and they're very nice to you and you have good food and a good time and you are on your way home. What's the first thing you do? You turn to your spouse and say, 'we should really have them over at our place to say thank you.' Then three weeks go by because things get busy and you forget, and then you feel guilty. Like, 'Oh man we really need to have them over as a way of saying thank you.' God's grace is not like that, He has given us this forgiveness in Christ and there's nothing we can do in return, period. And that is the mission of the church, not that we belong here, and this is our right to be here, but that God has graciously brought us into His church and with His people; and we gather around forgiveness and grace. Then we take that into the rest of the world.

The church doesn't exist to sit around and feel bad about ourselves. We love our neighbors because we know that God forgave the Assyrians, tax collectors and citizens of Redwood City. That this message is so profound and so beautiful, that Jesus in His death and resurrection has defeated addiction and hatred and abuse and hunger, that why wouldn't we want to share that with our neighbor? This is good news! The church catches some flack for forgetting that, when suddenly we think that we deserve something or belong here and so the church gets labeled as self-righteous. Which unfortunately can be an accurate accusation, but no one ever really got mad at a church for being loving and forgiving. And that's our mission, that's why we're here. Jesus forgives us, even someone as bad as me and you, and that's a powerful, motivating grace. I want to share that with other people. I want them to know this kind of power and this kind of restored relationship with God. Amen.