

Second Chances

By Rev. Sharon MacArthur, Acting Pastor
Translated by Mrs. Vivian Yee
in an All Church Bilingual Communion Service
Berkeley Chinese Community Church, UCC
February 4, 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

3 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ 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.

.....



- Today's scripture reading tells part of the story of Jonah, the stubborn and reluctant missionary.
- Throughout the Bible, people obey God - no questions asked!



- Remember Abraham and Sarah? They left their homeland and their extended families on a promise from God.



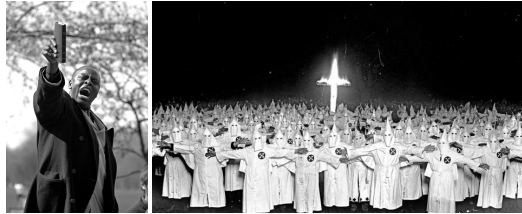
- And there's Moses – God tells him to demand the release of his people – and he heads back to Egypt to talk to the pharaoh!
- Even though – he's a fugitive!
- Remember? Moses *ran away* from Egypt - the only home he knew - because he had killed a palace guard.
- And yet – he goes back.!
- But Jonah?



- When God calls....Jonah goes in the other direction – not to Nineveh but to Tarshish!
- Why?
- Well, Nineveh is a city in Assyria.
- In the eighth and seventh centuries BC, the Assyrians conquered Palestine.



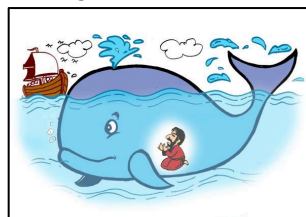
- The Assyrians burned its cities and deported its inhabitants.
- To Jonah and his people – Nineveh was the enemy!
- And God told Jonah to preach to Nineveh!



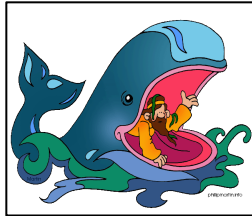
- That's like telling an African American brother or sister to go and preach to the Ku Klux Klan.
- Jonah is a man of **gentle** prejudice.
- He's not killing Ninevites or discriminating against them.
- He just doesn't want to preach to them.
- The Ninevites had caused a great deal of suffering for his family and his hometown.
- No wonder Jonah says, "Anywhere, Lord, anywhere but Nineveh."
- So he runs away!
- He boards a ship headed for Tarshish – in the opposite direction from Nineveh.
- If you know the story of Jonah, you probably remember what happens next.
- There's a storm on the sea.



- The crew throws Jonah overboard to appease the storm.
- God sends a big fish to grab Jonah and bring him back to the shore where he started.



- During the return trip, Jonah prays a psalm in the belly of the fish.
- That causes the fish to cough up this preacher.



- Then God says for a **second** time, "Now, Jonah, get going to Nineveh. Go to that great city and do what I want you to do."
- God's kindness is in those words:
- "And the word of the Lord came to Jonah a **second time.**"
- Get going to Nineveh," God says!
- We can't help but notice that God doesn't let up...and never gives up on Jonah or on us!
- So, our reluctant Jonah, dragging his feet, finally goes to Nineveh.



- There, Jonah preached a sermon with only a few Hebrew words in it.
- Loosely translated it goes, "Hey Nineveh! In forty days you're going to be overthrown!"
- Jonah walks for one full day into the middle of the city preaching that short sermon.
- He must have looked strange – after all, he spent 3 days in the belly of a fish.
- Maybe the digestive juices and gases bleached him lighter.
- His clothes were probably ragged,
- He might have had seaweed hanging from his hair and ears.
- This odd looking man walks into the center of town, and begins to preach God's message of destruction: "40 days...from now..."
- The good news is that the people hear and they believe.
- They cry out to God and change their evil ways.
- The King of Nineveh hears the sermon and He repents.
- Even the cattle hear and they repent.
- God is so impressed with what happened, even God repents.
- In verse 10 we read "...God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."
- Thanks to Jonah, *everybody* has turned toward the face of God!
- This is probably what God wanted in the first place!
- Good news – the Ninevites turned back to God!
- The bad news is that Jonah gets furious when he sees this.
- "You see, God? **That's** why I ran from you in the first place.
- When I preach doom & destruction, I want doom & destruction!
- But here you are - all merciful and kind, and forgiving!
- Jonah doesn't know what to do...
- The whole town is coming forward singing, "Just as I am, without one plea,"
- Jonah wants God to destroy the place and the people.
- "Punish them, Lord. **I'm** the righteous one here; **they** are the sinners."
- Jonah is angry!
- Why?
- The short answer is because God loves too many people.
- The longer answer, according to Jonah, is that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing."

- Maybe like Jonah, **that's** how **we** expect God to be toward us
- AND **that's** not always how we want God to be toward **others**.
- like the woman in this story...



- On a plane heading from Johannesburg South Africa to London...
- A woman walks down the aisle to discover her seat assignment sat her next to an African gentleman.
- She looks at her seat assignment to confirm it was correct.
- She asks her seatmate, "I'm sorry, are you in the right seat?"
- He smiles and nods.
- She looks around to see that there were no other empty seats in the section.
- She spoke to the flight attendant.
- "Excuse me," she said, "as you can see, I'm sitting next to a person whose skin color is different from mine."
- "Yes, ma'am, I can see that."
- "Well," she said, "this is unacceptable.
- Is there another available seat?"
- The flight attendant said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, it's against our policy to move people unnecessarily."
- "You don't understand," said woman, "this arrangement will **not** do.
- I have funds in my purse to pay for an alternative."
- The flight attendant said, "You do?"

- "Yes, I do, said the woman.
- Would you please go up to first class and see if there is an available seat?"
- I cannot sit next to this person."
- The flight attendant walked away & returned a few minutes later.
- She leaned over the woman, tapped the African man and said, "I'm sorry, sir, I hate to do this.
- I must make a seating change.
- If you follow me, we have a place for you in first class."

- The love of God makes it possible to give every person first-class treatment.
- Sometimes, however, we get stuck in our same old seats.

- Don't worry –
- The good news is this: God doesn't give up on us until we get it...



- that God's love is for everyone.
- that God's mercy is for everyone,
- that God's kindness is for everyone,
- but God is stuck with some reluctant messengers.
- AND God gives second chances –many chances - to the woman on the plane, to Jonah, to each of

us...

- to get it into our heads and our hearts that our Creator wants nothing more than to stand face to face with **every** creature beginning with us, but not ending there.
- that God is willing to love anybody and everybody...
- Even Jonah.
- Even you and me.
- even the woman on the plane.
- The difficulty is not in telling ourselves this is true.
- The difficulty is in believing this is true for everybody else.
- Thank God for Second Chances so we can work on this!

Let us pray.

O God, you have commanded us to love our enemies and pray for them – even those who persecute us, who do us harm. Help us to repay evil with good. Grow our spirit of meekness that we might overcome hatred of our enemies with a true love of neighbor. We pray this in the name of Jesus, Amen.