

Sermon 1624

Jonah 3.1-5, 10

January 21, 2018

This is the other story about Jonah. Oh, not the running away from God, being thrown overboard in the middle of the ocean, almost drowning until he was swallowed by a big fish and spit out on dry land three days later. Exciting as that story seems, the story before us today is even more exciting. It worked! Jonah's message worked! Tens of thousands of people were saved! The course of history was changed!

And here's Jonah's message.

Repent

1. Destruction is inevitable (1-4).
2. Deliverance is certain (5, 10).

I know. I know. You are thinking 1) this is the oldest message in the world. Repent. And 2) inevitable and certain are the same things, but destruction and deliverance are two totally different things! Has Pieper lost his mind?

You'll have to listen to find out.

“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh, and proclaim to it the message I give you (1).’”

Jonah gets a second chance. So does Nineveh. Now Nineveh was the capital city of an ancient and powerful nation called Assyria. If that name sounds familiar, there are Assyrian Christians around. They have a few churches where my daughter lives, in Campbell CA. They are a very threatened group in Iraq, ironically permitted under Saddam Hussein, but persecuted under the government our tax dollars set up and sustains. Anyway, back in Jonah's day the Assyrian empire had been a big deal, but they were in a funk of late. As harshly as they ruled their empire, one sniff of weakness and the whole thing would fly apart as conquered nations rose up to get revenge. And there was the foul smell of softness in the air in Nineveh in those days. But they hadn't grown soft on their vices. The Bible simply calls it wickedness. They were a violent people. A people who knew few limits. Imagine high school without any principals or teachers. Or a high school without school police. That's the bunch the LORD sends Jonah to.

“Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned (2-5).’”

As befits the capital city of an empire, Nineveh itself was a wonder. Three days to get through it. Three days to walk through all its neighborhoods. There were at least 120,000 inhabitants, probably a lot more. But all that was lost on Jonah. With a vengeance he strode through the city promising inevitable destruction. Forty more days and then, poof! Party over. Lights out. Nineveh is overturned.

We can understand that. You ignore the “Do Not Enter—Avalanche Danger” sign and enter the back-country for some snow shoeing and you get buried and killed in the ensuing avalanche. Nobody wonders what happens when a car goes down the “Do Not Enter” ramp and crashes with head-on traffic on the freeway. No mystery there. You play with fire, you get burned.

But it suddenly becomes a mystery when it comes to God. I wonder if we are less violent than the people of Nineveh were. Our homicide rate doesn't demand a person be stronger or better with a knife to kill someone. What did they call the Colt .45 in the West, the Great Equalizer? Even a 98 pound weakling can be lethal with a handgun now. Sexual crimes? 25% of female co-eds attacked. Sexual harassment in the work place and, why, it's hard to even imagine, in the Hollywood offices of people with unbridled power and no moral scruples! Who could have guessed? Domestic abuse. Child abuse. The violence done to our own bodies with addictions, be they legal or not. Maybe in our treatment with our fellow human beings, maybe that's where we should start making America great again. You poke the bear, you get attacked.

Our sinful human nature adds to the wickedness with an outrage that God should punish sin, that God should let us live with the consequences of our actions. The soul that sins, it shall die, the Bible says. We know the law, that those who do such things deserve death, yet we not only continue to do these very things, but we also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1.32).

Destruction is inevitable. Repent. Turn around. The way we are going is headed for destruction. Guaranteed. Certain. A sure bet.

Repent. Deliverance is certain.

“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth (5).”

What in the world did the people of Nineveh see in Jonah's message? “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” Maybe we should look no further than the word this account uses for God. LORD. That is the name God uses for himself when he wants us to think of the compassionate and gracious God, abounding in love, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. That's the name God uses for himself when he wants us to think of the promised Savior he promised to bring into the world to take away all our sins, to pay for our sins. The God who promised and fulfilled his promises to bring the Promised Savior into the world. I can't say this with dogmatic certainty, but when I see LORD, I think of my Beautiful Savior, my Jesus. I hope you do, too.

Now, if Jesus is telling us to repent, is he doing it to set the stage for our downfall? Is he just getting the documentation together so he can gloat and say, “I told you so” later on? That doesn't sound like the Jesus I know. Does that sound like the Jesus you know? The Jesus I know said, “God did not send his Son into the

world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (18).” The message, “Repent,” is designed to save people from inevitable destruction. Believing and acting on the message of repentance leads to certain deliverance.

The Assyrians must have caught that, right from the start. The God of this ratty Israelite was different from their weak and quarrelling gods. The God of Jonah was the God who made the heavens and the earth, made all the powers they worshipped as their little, puny gods. So the God of Jonah would know and display a far greater love and compassion than they could ever expect from their gods. He wouldn’t be bought over by an offering of black Angus beef cattle. He wanted a change of heart and a changed life. That was in that message of repentance from the LORD.

As a nation of warriors, the Assyrians also must have caught on to something else. In warfare, you don’t telegraph your plans. You secretly attack a stronger enemy. You ambush those who might put up a stiff fight. If it is an even fight, you give every impression you will fight for a hundred years if you have to. Never give up! You only telegraph your plans if you have such overwhelming advantage over your enemy that it is really more of a bother to fight them than to receive their surrender. So the fearsome Assyrian army, once they encircled a city, would slowly build up the siege walls to prevent anyone from getting in or out. And they would deliberately build their siege weapons in plain sight of the enemy. A garden slug could put two and two together. It would only be a matter of time before the besieged city would starve and be too weak to fend off an attack. Defeat and the slaughter of almost every survivor was certain. Give up now and live! They understood that. You don’t telegraph your plans unless you want your enemy to surrender.

God was telegraphing his plans. Not in a hundred years, not in forty months, but in forty short days, Nineveh would be destroyed. Who could stand up against the Maker of heaven and earth? They folded. They repented. They recognized their sin, were determined to change their ways and were convinced that Jonah’s LORD would forgive them.

And they were right.

“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened (10).”

Deliverance was certain. Without repentance, without the LORD’s forgiveness, destruction was inevitable. With repentance, with the LORD’s forgiveness, deliverance was certain.

Oh, and the kicker? Right after Jonah, the Assyrian empire would go on a tear. Rejuvenated they would continue where they left off 50 years earlier. They would expand their empire. They would destroy the northern kingdom of Israel, Jonah’s home country, as God punished the Israelites for their unbelief. The Assyrians would almost snuff out the southern kingdom, Judah, the rest of God’s people

huddled in Jerusalem under good King Hezekiah, one of the links on the family tree of Jesus. The Assyrians would kill, maim and exile millions. Yet the LORD forgave this bunch. They repented. He did forgive them. He didn't look at the beasts who would come later.

Sometimes we look around us and think all those other people out there need to repent. They are bad. We are good. I hope the first part of this sermon took away that thinking. If it didn't, I'm sorry. You need to repent. I need to repent. We sin and our sins are going to send us straight to hell. It is inevitable.

But at other times we look at our lives and think, how can God forgive me? Look what I do! It's almost like there's something inside of us that feels we have to earn God's forgiveness after the fact, like salvation is credited to us, but now we have to pay it off on monthly installments to a heavenly Visa or MasterCard account.

Don't feel that way. The Lord forgives. He doesn't put us on probation. The LORD forgives. He declares us not guilty of sin. "Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool (Isaiah 1.18)." When Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven," they are forgiven, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103.12)." If you and I have incurred such a debt of sin that we could not repay it before we were forgiven, how could we imagine we could repay it once we were forgiven? And what would that word, forgiven, even mean?

No, the people of Nineveh were delivered. They believed in the LORD, the God Jonah proclaimed. They believed in the LORD and received his forgiveness. And they stayed forgiven.

That is the repentant faith you and I have been given by God's Holy Spirit. Frightened over our sins, but comforted by God's grace, his undeserved gift of forgiveness, we rest easy in the Lord's arms. It is as certain as the new day. His mercies are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness.

Repent

1. Destruction is inevitable (1-4).
2. Deliverance is certain (5, 10).

So now you know the other Jonah story. Repent. It's the only way to certainly escape inevitable destruction. That's not crazy. That's faith.