

Turning Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1-23-2021 Pastor Bill Mosley

Between Johnson City and Fredericksburg on US 290 there's a town about the size of Doss or Cherry Spring. Its called Hye. Named for Hiram Brown. It gained national attention in the mid 1960s.

In 1965, the little post office in Hye, Texas was the site of the swearing in of Lawrence F. O'Brien as Postmaster General. That was because Lyndon Johnson, President of the United States, mailed his first letter there when he was four years old. That made it the place for the ceremony. At the swearing in, LBJ said, "It was about fifty-three years ago that I mailed my first letter from this post office. And Larry O'Brien told me a few moments ago that he is going out to find that letter and deliver it." -- Mosley, EMPHASIS, January-February 2000, p. 43

To be consistent is a virtue. And everyone has a calling, a mission, a purpose to their being. True consistency is to answer that calling, accomplish that mission, meet that purpose. The Post Office delivers mail. That is their calling. And they have been getting it right lately, and they are consistent. Every time the PO gets a good public image, they talk about raising the rates.

Christianity calls us to be consistent. But this consistency is to consistent repentance. We are called to turn away from the world. This is our calling, our mission, our purpose: to turn toward God and to help other people see that they need to turn toward God.

The world is persistent. It demands our attention; we constantly fight to keep our attention on Christ. We know that like Peter walking on the water, if our eyes are on Christ, we forge ahead. But if we look away, if the waves get our attention, we sink. Since our attention wavers, its up and down all the time.

Like Jonah. God says, Go to Nineveh. Jonah buys a ticket for Spain. God turns Jonah around. He turns Nineveh around. And God turns around.

Is no one in this story consistent? Jonah turned. Nineveh turned. God turned.

It took some doing for God to get Jonah to Nineveh. We've heard the story many times, I'm sure. That God sent a big fish to swallow Jonah and take him to Nineveh, carrying Jonah three days in his stomach and spitting him up on the beach. That's where he is in this morning's reading.

Here's where we start to lose the point of Jonah. Of the creatures of the sea only the sperm whale is big enough to swallow a man whole. That makes this scripture the only recorded instance of a sperm whale in the Mediterranean Sea. Except that the language of the Bible doesn't insist on a whale; it might just be a fancy way of referring to any large sea monster. Kind of an ancient science fiction.

The point is not that some kind of big fish brought a man back to where he came from, but that the man RAN FROM GODS CALL!

In itself that is not unusual. People, even faithful people do that all the time. They run from, or just ignore, Gods call. And God is there for them anyway. But there's something more. Jonah ran from GOD'S GRACE.

Jonah gets around to admitting why he refused to go to Nineveh in chapter 4: anger and vengeance. He says to God, I know that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentant of evil.

Jonah didn't want Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to hear the good news and repent! For God would save them. The Assyrians were idolaters, and their empire had conquered Israel. They were hated enemies.

In this story, we are the Jonah. Reluctant to do Gods will, eager to see our enemies destroyed, to get revenge. Unhappy to find people we don't like included in the kingdom of

God. Jonah is anxious to add to his reputation as a prophet – don't we like to be known as righteous and Christian people? Even when we aren't?

But the story of Jonah shows God's power and love: He can use even the reluctant messenger, the letter carrier who takes 53 years to deliver a letter. And here also is good news: Jonah surrenders to the will of God, but it's clear even to the last verse that he didn't like it or understand it.

Some parts of God's grace we don't like or understand, either. But it's there for us, nonetheless.

Jonah turned, and Nineveh turned.

Jonah's book is obviously not a history book. The facts just aren't straight. The biggest fantasy in the whole two pages of the book of Jonah is not that Jonah was swallowed by the whale, or even that Jonah swallowed the whale. It is the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was not a power at the time of Jonah, and there is no record in or out of the Bible of a mass conversion to Judaism.

In fact, the entire book of the prophet Nahum consists of prophecies about the unrepentant Nineveh.

Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC. The reference to its size and power must mean that this city had already been destroyed and memory of its size and power had faded.

Jonah gets to Nineveh and says a few words, and suddenly there's a public proclamation & everybody is praying & fasting & worshipping God. Evidently all they needed was one faithful witness.

Everyone is an influence for good or evil, whether he wants to be or not. A blank he cannot be.

Everyone turns in this story. Jonah turns, Nineveh turns, and God turns.

This puzzles our modern minds: to speak of God as repenting of evil. We think more often of the wrath of God, of Judgement. If we're bad, we get punished. Left to ourselves, we'll spend eternity lost, in the lake of fire, wondering what it is we did wrong and justifying it to ourselves.

But if we concentrate long enough on the ways of God with his world we see that just the opposite is true. The error is in us, not in God. We are the ones with the debt to be paid. We think, If we have to pay it, everybody else should too.

But our debt is forgiven. Jesus pays it for us. And everybody else, too. It still seems to us, though, that our debt is paid, but that sinner over there better get his punishment.

It looks to us as if God changes his mind, turns from this path of judgement to Grace, when actually, he's been gracious right along – it's we who are not gracious.

And in reality, judgment is something we bring on ourselves. We know the rules, judge and be judged. You reap what you sow. Love and be loved. Forgive and be forgiven. That is our calling, our mission, our purpose.

When God conceived the thought of the creation of people, he called to him the three great ministers who waiting upon his throne: Justice, Truth and Mercy. He asked for their counsel and advice.

Justice said, O God, make not these creatures. They will trample on thy Law.

And Truth spoke: O God, make them not, for they will pollute thy sanctuaries in nature.

But Mercy dropped to her knees and cried through her tears, O God, make them! I will watch over them in all the dark paths they have to tread!

So God made the people and said to them, You are the children of mercy. Remember this when you deal with your neighbor. 116 words

Lord keep us turning to you, saying no to whatever makes it more difficult to say yes to you.