

January 21

Last week we started a four week journey through scripture with our focus on Recognizing and Responding to God's voice. We started with the gentle story of a young Samuel learning from his mentor, Eli, how to recognize when God is speaking and to make himself available to listen.

This week we are going to jump into the story of God, Jonah and the people of Nineveh. Most of us have probably at least heard of Jonah because his claim to fame is his all-expenses paid three day, two night stay in the belly of a whale. Jonah never had a problem recognizing God's voice. Jonah knew the voice of God and understood what God wanted of him. The thing about Jonah is that he didn't want to do what God said.

Anybody here relate to that? The voice of God through scripture or through those wiser than we are or through prayer is perhaps not always mysterious or difficult to discern, but our response to what we hear can be obedience, it can be to ignore God's counsel or instruction, and it can even be downright disobedience. Jonah didn't just put his fingers in his ears and tell God I-can't-hear-you. Jonah actively went the opposite way that God told him to go.

And eventually, others started to pay the price along with Jonah for his sulking disobedience and he jumped off the boat he had boarded and was swallowed up into the belly of a big fish where he prayed and stewed for three days until Jonah agreed to do what he was told to do and then the fish vomited him up on shore.

Friends, I would just invite us to think for a moment about how real the Bible can be. Anybody here ever feel like you've been chewed up and spit out when living in disobedience. I have. And I've learned that it's much easier to obey God than to go my own way and end up as so much fish vomit.

But that's the part where Jonah heard God but reacted in disobedience. There's much more to the story because the object of God's wrath wasn't Jonah. He was just the messenger. Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh because God was done with them and their sinful, greedy, violent ways. Jonah was supposed to warn them, but he'd prefer to leave them to get what's coming to them.

After coming to his senses, we pick up the story in Jonah 3:1-10.

The Lord's word came to Jonah a second time: ² "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you." ³ And Jonah

got up and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.)

⁴Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

⁶When word of it reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, stripped himself of his robe, covered himself with mourning clothes, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he announced, "In Nineveh, by decree of the king and his officials: Neither human nor animal, cattle nor flock, will taste anything! No grazing and no drinking water! ⁸Let humans and animals alike put on mourning clothes, and let them call upon God forcefully! And let all persons stop their evil behavior and the violence that's under their control!" ⁹He thought, Who knows? God may see this and turn from his wrath, so that we might not perish.

¹⁰God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn't do it.

Oh church! If only we, today, would be like the Ninevites! "And the people of Nineveh believed God." It's so simple. God sent a warning through Jonah that they would basically not like the consequences of what would happen if they continued on in the manner they were currently living – and. the. people. of. Nineveh. believed. God.

And their belief was immediately and inextricably followed by action. Believing God meant changing their ways. It started with those who heard Jonah speaking in the middle of town. The movement of repentance started with the people and made it all the way up to the king. This is one of the greatest repentance stories in all of scripture as far as I'm concerned. Everyone from the richest and most powerful to the poorest and least influential fasted, turned toward God, participated in peacemaking with God by the halt of evil behavior and the violence that's under their control.

Let's let that soak in for a moment. Just a moment. An entire city, that takes three days to walk across, a well populated place, halted because they believed God's word coming through Jonah was true. Perhaps they knew that they were living a risky way and that a comeuppance was what they deserved. Whatever the case, and I don't know their thoughts, but the witness of scripture is that there were no excuses, there was no pretending like they didn't know better. There was a very reasonable self-preservation reflex that engaged if nothing else. Was everyone happy about this decree from the king? Probably not. I'm sure there were folks who were quite put out because they profited from the variety of evil actions and chosen violence in the city.

However, evil actions and violence (physical, mental, economic, racial, emotional) are not given a free pass by God. Our God is a God of justice and through Jonah the Ninevites were warned that justice was coming. But our God is also a God of second chances. And when the Ninevites believed they believed both in the God of justice and the God of second chances.

Remember, the king thought...maybe God will see our belief, our respect, our changes and will spare us the consequences of our evil behaviors and our perpetration of violence that is within our control. If we actually respond to the voice of God in the way that we know is right, then perhaps God will plan for our preservation rather than let the overthrow take it's course.

Again, one of the most refreshing, liberating, cleansing things I notice in this story is a complete lack of excuses. They knew they were wrong, they knew God was within God's right to overthrow them (upset the power dynamics of evil and violence), and instead of doing what people do so much of the time in making excuses or trying to explain why they did the evil thing as if a lack of understanding was the problem, they stopped the bad stuff. They changed. And they hit a pause button in the form of fasting as an entire population.

Oh, what if we would all hear the voice of God telling us that we are going to be overthrown one day and choose to just stop that which we know is wrong rather than trying to explain it away? What if we heard that we were headed into destruction, ruin, and we were the ones driving the bus and put on the brakes?

These Ninevites surprise me every time I read this story, and I love them more and more each and every time. I don't love them because they are evil, but because they undertook the tremendous work of humbling themselves and changing their ways.

Now, some of us might be thinking, but yeah, this is the Old Testament...God doesn't punish whole cities anymore and because of Jesus we have a New Covenant. God doesn't send prophets to warn us of impending doom. And, remember, it's not our works and good behavior that saves us.

Well, God does operate under a New Covenant in Christ Jesus, but repentance by the admission of sin and guilt and receiving new life is the same process of salvation and being set right as the Old Covenant. It's just that the old system required many offerings and the new system is paid in full by Jesus so repentance and change is viewed as being worked out over the course of our whole life.

There is temptation to think that we aren't like those Ninevites. There is a temptation to hear the story and think that Nineveh was ancient, or Nineveh was like Las Vegas (Sin City), or Nineveh is not me or not here or not now. Unfortunately, Nineveh is now, Nineveh is here, and Nineveh is us.

If we can't relate to Nineveh, then we can't relate to the need for grace, mercy, salvation or the call to do better because we know better. And the world I see around me and the heart that beats within me knows that Nineveh is not just some ancient city to which Jonah was called. Nineveh is wherever sin and evil and violence (particularly that which is within our ability to control) is allowed to continue without repentance, without recognition that God defines what is good and bad and that we are part of the mess our world is in.

But the good news for Nineveh and the good news for us is that change is always possible. Change is possible when people listen to God, believe God, and are affected by what God says....in this case motivated to change in quick and drastic fashion. And it makes a difference. Our response to God can make a difference in the ongoing work of God being God, being love, granting mercy and grace and righteousness.

¹⁰ God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn't do it.

Ultimately, we know that the persistence of sin in humanity required more than humanity could ever pay or sit in ashes long enough to overcome so as Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:16-21, *"¹⁶ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.¹⁷ God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.¹⁸ Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son.*

¹⁹ "This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil.²⁰ All who do wicked things hate the light and don't come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light.²¹ Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

There is an assumption I've made about the Ninevites, based on their repentance, and it is that they knew that much of what they were doing was evil and violent. They also knew that much of it was within their own control. God's warning provided motivation to live within God's recommended ways (which were known but not followed) rather

than to disobey and do whatever the heck they wanted to do. They allowed their sin to be brought into the light.

For lost folks living in the darkness of sin, believing in Jesus, finding our way to salvation, is much the same. Sin is sin is sin. We all suffer from it, we all accrue a debt of sin, and we all need Jesus to save us from it. But sometimes coming into the light is just too hard. Sometimes it seems easier to hide away in a dark cave of justification, excuses and explanations of why we did the evil, violent, greedy, selfish thing we did or why we keep doing the evil, violent, greedy, selfish things we do.

What the Ninevites did, from the those who heard Jonah preaching in the street, right up to the king, and right back down the line, was brave. With their heart in one hand and hope in the other, they believed God and were saved.

And you know what? It really ticked Jonah off. Jonah was rooting for their destruction. Jonah sat himself down and had a pity party because these sinners were spared, because they really believed God and got to go on living. And there are still those who hate to see a sinner saved, still those who would rather shout in the dark than turn on a light.

There are still those who would celebrate a good smiting right from the hand of God, but I think this story is here for us at this moment in time so that we will see the goodness of God and find our way to believing and celebrating with others who believe. And so that we can hold our hearts and our hope and live brave in a world where it's much easier to prey, p-r-e-y, on those with whom we disagree or hold prejudice against instead of pray, p-r-a-y, for those with whom we disagree or don't understand or downright hate.

But, church, God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Our God is still the God who gave the Ninevites a warning, and relented when they repented. Our God is still the God of justice – it's coming one day – but our God is also forever the God of relenting when we are repenting.

As we continue to listen for the voice of God in our own lives, in our family, in our workplaces, in our community, may we be those who hear and respond by believing God – in all his goodness, love and mercy, which includes the justice that evil will receive one day.

We will end worship today singing, Mighty to Save, because God absolutely is...
Let us pray...