



## **TO NINEVEH!**

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*(Third Sunday after the Epiphany)*



# **NEW HOPE**

## **UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

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**Lectionary Texts:** Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12;  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

<sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So 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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>10</sup>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.

**Psalm 62:5-12**

<sup>5</sup>For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

<sup>6</sup>He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

<sup>7</sup>On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

<sup>8</sup>Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah

<sup>9</sup>Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.

<sup>10</sup>Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

<sup>11</sup>Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God,

<sup>12</sup>and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work.

**1 Corinthians 7:29-31**

<sup>29</sup>I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, <sup>30</sup>and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, <sup>31</sup>and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

## Mark 1:14-20

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” <sup>16</sup>As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup>And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>18</sup>And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup>As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup>Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

### **The Message: To Nineveh!**

Last week we talked about our calling and what evangelism is really like. On the surface, this week’s lessons don’t seem to have a common thread...but...if you look below the surface there are connections to explore. They all have something to do with a call from God. The Gospel connection is pretty obvious, but what about the Epistle? Remember that when we look for meaning in a letter we must remember that it was written to address specific issues for a particular audience.

In this case, the church at Corinth, a particularly difficult town, was being advised how to behave in several earthly respects. Since Paul believed the “Parousia”, the second coming, was imminent, his advice was that it might be best to avoid things such as marriage because of the impending crisis. Now it is obvious that Paul was wrong about the timing of the Parousia, and therefore that particular advice should not be taken out of context. But there is still truth in Paul’s underlying message that Christians are to be different from the others in the world.

It is not hard to understand why Christians should - mourn as though they were not mourning, and buy as though they had no possessions, and deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. We are called to be in the world, but not of the world. We are called to be different.

Which brings us to Jonah - a book which was not likely designed to tell history but to relay a larger truth to the Hebrew people through a story they would understand. But it, too, still speaks to us if we understand its real purpose. With that, I’d like to help you build a framework for interpreting this kind of wisdom story.

The Hebrew people had returned from a long exile in Babylon. According to their Deuteronomic understanding (apostasy, judgment, repentance, deliverance) their time of punishment was over. They had repented and received reconciliation in their return to the homeland. But things were not going well for the Hebrew people. They were suffering in difficult times, and they were still surrounded by powerful enemy states.

It didn't make a lot of sense to them in their Deuteronomic thinking...after all, they were trying to live in relationship with God...but things weren't getting better. So instead of following the covenant made by their ancestors to spread the name of God throughout the land, their leaders - including the prophets Nehemiah and Ezra - convinced them that the best thing to do was to isolate themselves and protect what they had. You know what I mean - lay low - circle the wagons - and stay to themselves as a way to keep out of trouble with the neighbors. Their instructions went so far as to encourage people to divorce any non-Jewish spouses and expel any not fully Jewish children from their midst.

To guard their traditions they were taking extreme measures. Today we call that ethnic cleansing. It is obvious to us that following that advice wouldn't fulfill God's purpose. So, this wisdom story about Jonah was a pointed and poignant response to these conditions and a reminder to the Hebrew people of the need to go beyond their own community - to reach out of their comfort zone to fulfill God's purpose...to show God's Mad, Crazy Love even to people they'd rather not spend time with. It reminds us of the same need in today's world.

The book of Jonah is in the style referred to as a Wisdom story...books or stories written to speak to continuing problems...books to give guidance and hope to people in confusing times...books to remind the community what a right relationship with God looks like. Now, wisdom stories often use hyperbole<sup>1</sup> to make a point. Jesus was a wisdom teacher and he used the same device...For example the story about it being easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to access the kingdom of God. Obviously the exaggerated image makes the point. And so we come to the familiar story of Jonah...and it doesn't matter how much of it is literally true because it isn't a book about history. It is a wisdom story. What matters is the religious message.

Our reading today was only an excerpt of the story, but without the proper context the message is lost. We've talked about the setting already, so let's review the story. Jonah is a reluctant biblical prophet who is mentioned in at least two other books in the Bible.

This story opens with God telling Jonah to go east from Israel to Assyria to "cry out" against wickedness in the city of Nineveh. Jonah flees in the opposite direction, by sea. God calls and he runs the other way...of course none of us have ever done that have we? Why does he run away? Here is the

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<sup>1</sup> *Hyperboles* are exaggerations to create emphasis or effect.

conundrum<sup>2</sup>. He is afraid he might be successful if he goes...that the Ninevites repent and that God might spare them from destruction...and of course, Nineveh is an enemy of the Jews. Jonah isn't interested in saving the people of Nineveh.

As he is sailing westward a storm rises, the ship's sailors try to save the ship, but finally accept Jonah's confession because of his flight from God, and he volunteers to be thrown overboard. A fish swallows him and spits him out on land three days later. This time Jonah obeys God and goes to Nineveh, (which the scriptures describe in hyperbole as much larger than it really was. Nineveh would have taken about 10 minutes to cross - not three days). His shouted warnings work: the people repent, and the mind of God, who would have punished the city, is changed.

The story ends with Jonah watching to see if God will destroy the city. He is shaded by a bush "appointed" by God, which is then killed by a worm. He argues with God about why Nineveh was spared and complains about the death of the plant. He is angry.

The story concludes with these words, *"<sup>9</sup>But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die."<sup>10</sup>Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup>And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"*

It is worth noting that in the story everything is "appointed" by God from the prophet to the storm...from the fish to the Bush that shades Jonah until the appointed worm kills it. That is a "wisdom" motif<sup>3</sup> that signals us to look for the underlying meaning.

The Hebrew people would have understood the message that God wanted them to be a light to the world - and they would have understood the message that there is only one God. It is even likely that in reading or hearing this story they would remember that God was there for everyone- not just them. They probably didn't want to hear that part, but, it was a message they needed to hear at that time...and that is a message we still need to hear. If you love God, you will reach out and love your neighbors...no matter how unlovable they appear to be.

Like us, the Hebrew people had been called to make the name of God known in all the world. When they failed to do this in the past they believed they were punished - with exile to Egypt, and again years later with exile to Babylon.

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<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster defines *conundrum* as a riddle whose answer is or involves a pun; a question or problem having only a conjectural answer; or an intricate and difficult problem.

<sup>3</sup> *Motifs* are recurring subjects, ideas, structures, etc. that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

The Jonah story is a reminder of God's call and a reminder of our own history of turning away. It raises important questions. Why weren't the people fulfilling their mission to the world? Was it from fear of persecution? Or, was it because they didn't care about others having access to the grace and love of YHWH<sup>4</sup>?

That is the interpretive message for us today, isn't it? Why don't we fulfill our mission to the whole world? Do we care if others have access to God's grace and love? Is it easier to isolate ourselves from places like Iran, Zimbabwe, and China than it is to reach out? Why is it easier for us to be like Jonah and define others as enemies than it is to see them as people of God...people worthy of our caring? Why do we prefer passing judgment to passing on God's love? I like to view it as an if/then kind of thing.

Here are some ifs:

- If Jonah could carry God's message to the enemy - the Ninevites - and God could forgive;
- If Jesus could call disciples and they could follow;
- If Jesus could reveal even more of what we call the "Kingdom of God" through his ministry to those inside and outside the Jewish community and they could respond;
- If Paul could spread the Good News of the Kingdom of God among the Gentiles - and God's presence could be felt; and
- If Jesus could love everyone enough die on a cross for us and the work of the kingdom...

Then it shouldn't be so hard for us to do our part in the building of the Kingdom. Our call isn't obscure...and the call isn't hard to understand. Like Jonah - we are called to minister with love to those we don't want to love...we are called to whatever place God wants us to be. And so, we, too hear the words...do something you'd rather not do...do something to show God's love for all his children...now our Nineveh won't be the same place geographically as Jonah's. But God is still calling...and he is still asking us to "Get up, and go to Nineveh"!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

Amen!

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Sermons are also available pre-printed. The pre-printed sermons are in the information racks at the entrance to the New Hope UMC Sanctuary. To obtain previous printed sermons contact the Church Secretary at 252-264-3999 or newhope1809@centurylink.net.

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<sup>4</sup> YHWH is the Sacred and true name of God, our Heavenly Creator. YHWH's name means "**I am that I am**" and it is the same in all languages.