

“Getting on Mission”

Sermon Series on the Book of Jonah

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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC

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(Jonah 3:1-10)

Introduction.

My favorite movie of all time is *It's a Wonderful Life* starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. It's the story of a man named George Bailey who, when he contemplates taking his life because of things that happened to him, is given an opportunity to see what the world would have been like if he had never been born. At the end of the film he is given a second chance at life. I cry every time I watch the movie around Christmas.

George Bailey isn't alone in benefiting from a second chance in life. For example, Walt Disney was fired from a newspaper in 1919 because his editor said he “lacked imagination and had no good ideas.” Oprah Winfrey lost her first job as an evening reporter because she couldn't keep her emotions in check when reporting the news. Elvis Presley was told by the concert hall manager at the Grand Ole Opry that he was better off returning to Memphis and driving trucks than trying to play music. And Henry Ford went broke five times with his early businesses, all of which failed.

There is something about a story of a person getting a second chance in life that stirs the heart and inspires the imagination. Why is that? I think it's because all of us know how many times we've blown it in life, and we all realize just how much we need mercy and grace and an opportunity to start over. Jonah sure did, and the story of his second chance is told in the passage we've read this morning.

I. Getting on Mission.

Our text begins, “*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’*” (Jonah 3:1). One of the great lessons of the book of Jonah is that God continues to use those who return to Him and repent. No matter how far we have wandered off the path of faith, and no matter how badly we have blown it in life, God is long-suffering, and He is eager to extend mercy and grace to anyone who asks for it and will give them a second chance.

Just like Jonah, there were many people in the Bible who received a second chance to do what God called them to do. Moses was a murderer, but God still used him to deliver the people of Israel. Elijah quit his job and complained

bitterly, and he battled depression. But God re-commissioned the prophet, and he was able to accomplish even more for the Lord. Peter denied even knowing Jesus on three occasions, but Christ forgave His disciple, restored him to ministry, and Peter went on to be a pillar of the early church. And John Mark deserted his friends at Pamphylia, yet later on God used him as a missionary again, and He also inspired Mark to write the Gospel that bears his name.

Maybe you have a story of being given a second chance in life. Perhaps you, too, have experienced an opportunity to start over again. Our God is a God of the Second Chance, and He isn't finished writing your story yet. If you want to begin again, ask God and He'll show you the way.

Still, in spite of God's forgiveness and grace, and in spite of being given a second chance, Jonah didn't want to go. He still didn't want to see the Ninevites experience the mercy of God because they were enemies of his nation. Jonah was a racist and a nationalist, and he was a reluctant prophet if there ever was one. But Jonah was obedient, and he kept his vow. He concluded his prayer in the belly of the great fish by saying, *"What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord."*

Sometimes just living out our vows is what it takes to do God's will. Your heart may not be in it, and you may wish you didn't have to do it, but you go ahead and do what you're supposed to do anyway. Our motives don't always have to be pure in order to do God's will, and we don't always have to be excited to fulfill His call on our lives. Sometimes it's enough just to do the right thing even when you don't want to, even when it's hard.

That's especially true in marriage. I look back over the 38 years Lorie and I were married, and while we had a very good marriage and I cherish the years we enjoyed together, there were times when our love was tested. And there were moments, even seasons, when it was difficult for us to love each other. On occasion my feelings for Lorie were anger and disappointment, not love, because of something she said or did. And it was in those moments that I chose to simply live my vows. Years before I promised to love Lorie for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, to love and to cherish, until we were parted by death. God honored our efforts to live our vows even when we didn't feel like it, and He always pulled us through and helped us learn to love again. He can do that for you, too, friend, if you let Him.

The important thing to remember is that regardless of Jonah's attitude and regardless of the prophet's heart not really being in it, Jonah was able to get back on mission, and he did what God asked him to do. The God of the universe invites us to join Him on His mission of love for a lost and broken world. Will we respond and answer His call? Last week during our moment for mission, Tim reminded us that on one occasion during His earthly ministry, Jesus looked out

over the crowds, and He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then Jesus said to His disciples, “*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His field*” (Mt. 19:35-38). Are you willing to get back on mission and follow God’s call?

II. The Worst Sermon Ever.

Have you ever heard someone preach a really bad sermon? (I hope it hasn’t been here, and I hope it wasn’t me!) When my friend Jim Singleton was in seminary in Richmond, VA, he was assigned to preach at four little churches in the Shenandoah Valley as their pulpit supply. One week he would preach at one church and then drive several miles to another one. Then the following week he would do the same thing at the other two churches. The members loved it because they got to skip church and go fishing every other week and not feel guilty!

One Sunday Jim preached a sermon at one of the little churches, and as he and his wife drove to the second church, Jim was feeling pretty good about his message, so he asked his wife what she thought of the sermon. Sara paused and looked up in the air as though she was going through rolodex, and then she replied, “I think that was the worst sermon I’ve ever heard.”

Jim was incredulous and said, “The worst?!”

She thought for a minute, and then she responded, “Yep, that’s the worst.”

Well, Jim couldn’t preach the worst sermon his wife had ever heard again, so in a panic he began to think about another message he could give at the next church. As they were driving to the second church, he decided to use the notes for a Bible study he had led earlier in the week which were tucked away in his Bible, and that was the message he decided to preach at the second church.

When the service was over, and Jim had preached the second sermon, he and Sara got into the car and started to drive back to Richmond. Jim leaned over and asked Sara, “So, what did you think of that sermon?”

She answered, “You should have stuck with the first one.”

Sara is a woman in whom there is no guile!

Despite Jim’s two sermons which he preached in Virginia that day, I think that Jonah gets the award for the worst sermon ever. It’s one sentence – “*Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned*” (3:4). No introduction, no three points and a poem, no illustrations, and no invitation to commitment. What was Jonah thinking? If he had preached that sermon in a preaching class in my seminary, he would have gotten an F for sure.

But this is the message God told Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh, and it’s the message God used to bring repentance and transformation to everyone in that community. It just goes to show you – it isn’t the messenger or even the

message as much as it is the power of God that brings spiritual change.

Many years ago I was at a Promise Keepers event. 50,000 men were in a stadium, and an evangelist was giving the message on the last night of the gathering. I sat up in the stands listening to the sermon, and I thought to myself, “This isn’t much of a sermon. I think I could do a better job of presenting the gospel than this guy.” However, when he gave the invitation, men began to stream down the aisles and walk to the front of the stadium. Hundreds responded to his message of salvation, and they came forward in droves. God spoke to my heart and said, “Don’t be so proud, Peter. I can use anyone I choose to bring people to Myself, and it’s all about the power of the Holy Spirit, not the cleverness of the message or the skill of the messenger. And that includes you, by the way.” I’ve never forgotten that.

You may not think you have much to offer in telling other people about Jesus and what He means to you. You may think, “I don’t know much about the Bible, I’m not a theologian, and I’m not even very experienced in spiritual matters.” That doesn’t really matter. God just wants you to be a witness and tell others what Jesus has done for you. If he can bring spiritual transformation to the people in the whole city of Nineveh through the simple sermon Jonah preached that day, He can surely use you. Remember, God isn’t interested in our ability as much He is in our availability. Will you make yourself available to the Lord to tell someone about Christ in the coming week?

III. The Repentance of Nineveh.

Our text says that Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, and it was. In Jonah’s day Nineveh was very impressive, especially in comparison to the hills of Palestine from which the prophet came. The Bible says that Nineveh was so big that a visit there required three days. This is because greater Nineveh included five surrounding cities which together were 60 miles in circumference. There were great aqueducts and canals and huge gardens, and there was even a library from which archeologists have discovered 16,000 volumes, some which describe creation and the flood. Nineveh proper was surrounded by a huge wall that was and wide enough on the top for three chariots to run abreast.

When Jonah went to Nineveh, he must have thought, “How can I have any impact on a city of this size? I’m just one person. And why would they even listen to me? They are powerful people, and they don’t like Jews.” Nevertheless, the simple message Jonah proclaimed impacted the people of Nineveh in a powerful way, and they responded with repentance and also put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of contrition.

Against all expectations, the powerful and violent city of Nineveh repented en masse. How was this possible? It really came down to the power of God, but there were other things at work which perhaps helped. For example, historians point out that about the time of Jonah's mission, Assyria had experienced a series of famines, plagues, revolts, and even an eclipse. All of these may have been seen as omens of far worse things to come.

In addition, there are some commentators who suggest Jonah's disgorging from the great fish may have been witnessed by others who happened to have been there. If that is the case then the story of Jonah's experience might have preceded him to Nineveh via caravans or traders and made the people there all the more open to hear what he had to say.

Another consideration is that the main god of the Ninevites looked like a big fish, so you can imagine that a story of someone enduring three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish would have gotten their attention. And finally, Jonah's appearance may have also been a factor in making his preaching effective. In the late 1800's a sailor fell overboard and was swallowed by a whale shark. Two days later the shark was caught and cut open, and the man was found alive. However, he looked different. Somehow the fish's digestive juices had burned off the first layer of his skin so that every feature of the man was white, and his hair was burned away. He stayed that way for the rest of his life. Can you imagine what it might have been like for someone to walk through the streets of Nineveh looking like that and proclaiming a message of warning? It would certainly have gotten their attention.

In spite of the weak sermon, in spite of Jonah not even wanting it to be effective, and in the face of every reason why it shouldn't have worked, the Bible says, "*The people of Nineveh believed God's message.*" They "*turned from their evil ways and stopped all their violence.*" From the highest to the lowest in society, they all repented. They even made their animals fast from eating and drinking, and they put sackcloth on them. The people of Nineveh didn't want to take any chances, because they were hoping God would show them mercy if were contrite. God heard their plea and He gave them grace, just like He extended grace to Jonah.

The response of the people, like the sailors in chapter 2, was remarkable. Imagine the picture – all the people and all the cows and all the sheep fasting with sackcloth tied to their backs in a display of national repentance. The image of Jonah's enemy was transformed from one of a fierce conquering warrior to a humble supplicant. Jonah should have been thrilled. He's the greatest prophet in the history of the world. With just a few words, he turned a whole city to God. He would be headed for the evangelism hall of fame.

But God is the real hero of the story. This isn't about Jonah learning from his mistakes and finally getting it right. And it isn't about Nineveh's ability to reach deep down past their perverted history and brutal treatment of other people to find the inherent goodness in their souls and decide to love each other and obey God. Rather, this is a story about a holy and a just God who would have been in His rights to destroy all the people of Nineveh (and Jonah for that matter), but who is patient with sinners, pursues the rebellious, and gives grace to the undeserving. God is a God who rescues, and no one is past saving.

What is there in your life for which you need to repent today? How has God convicted you of something in recent days you need to correct, amend, or repair? God is in the business of redeeming, and no matter how broken the person or the city may be, no one and no community is beyond hope. Turn to God and allow Him to transform your life. Hope is just a prayer away.

Conclusion.

When I was growing up in Atlanta, there was a big group of kids in my neighborhood. And in the summertime a bunch of us would get together after dinner and play games like kick the can until it was dark. Every once in a while we'd play a game where you had a chance to hit a ball or to kick it, and many times there were kids who struggled to make contact. Whenever that happened, the child would ask, "Can I have a do-over?" And we usually gave them a chance to try again.

Each one of us at one time or another has wished that we could have a do-over, another shot to get it right. We've made mistakes in our finances, our careers, our parenting, our marriages, our friendships, and we wish we could have another chance. We want to begin again. With Christ you can, because God is a God of second chances. There are times when we can't erase the consequences of the choices we've made, but every day is a new day, and God will give you a second chance in life if you ask Him. Jonah didn't get it right the first time, but God gave him a do-over. And it led to the redemption of an entire city. What might God do with you if you take His offer of a do-over today?