

Epiphany 3 1/25/15
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

SO JONAH AROSE AND WENT TO NINEVEH, ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF THE LORD...JONAH BEGAN TO GO INTO THE CITY, GOING A DAY'S JOURNEY. AND HE CALLED OUT, "YET FORTY DAYS, AND NINEVEH SHALL BE OVERTHROWN!"

Have you ever driven into a city and seen the sign it seems every town has welcoming visitors to that city? Imagine, if you will for a moment, the sign welcoming visitors to Nineveh. It would read something like this:

Welcome to Nineveh, the great city, also known as the bloody city.

Population: over 120,000 with no moral compass.

That's about what the sign would say. Nineveh was a great city, very cosmopolitan, but it had its woes. It was the Vegas, the Rio de Janeiro, of Jonah's world.

But, Nineveh is also Nineveh. Its its own city, with its own way of doing things, with its own kind of people, all of which can be described simply as being evil. The people of Nineveh were evil people. They were spiritually indifferent, if not complacent. They were given to a great amount of violence. In fact, they were known for being ruthless in battle. They treated their captured foes to unspeakable brutality. They were known, in their dealings with people, to employ every form of trickery, deceit, and scandal under the sun. They had a temple to the fertility goddess Ishtar, in the middle of town, which tells us that among the Ninevites, sexual immorality was the norm.

That's the great city of Nineveh. So are you starting to understand why it is that when God said to Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you," Jonah arose and hopped

a boat for Tarshish? Who would want to deal with those people, being as evil as they are? Certainly not Jonah.

What is not so easy to understand is what the Hebrew text has to say about Nineveh. Our English Bible translates it this way, “Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth.” But, the original Hebrew text reads this way: “Now Nineveh was a great city belonging to God, three days’ journey in breadth.” The English does not translate it clearly that way, but in the original Hebrew, its there: “Nineveh was a great city, belonging to God.” That’s hard to understand. Why would a holy and just God want to have a city like Nineveh filled with immorality and idolatry, filled with evil and violence, belong to Him? Why would He want those people, being evil as they are? They don’t want to belong to God. They don’t want anything to do with Him. And yet, God says Nineveh is a great city “belonging to Him”. Not only does He love it, He cares for it. So much so in fact, He sends the Prophet Jonah to call the people there to repentance. Why would God do that? Why doesn’t He just join forces with Jonah, hop a boat to Tarshish and overthrow Nineveh in His wrath? That would make a lot more sense to us.

Why did God do what He did? For the very same reason that God does not get on a ship and sail away from you, away from your city. Let’s be honest about it, Beulah, Glen Ullin, or wherever you call home is no better than Nineveh and the Ninevites. We are just as evil, with the same kind of problems. Wait a minute, Pastor, you say! Ok, yes, to be sure, you have not ended your neighbor's life in murderous brutality, but your anger against your neighbor has shown itself in your thoughts, words, and deeds. Isn’t scandal, deceit, trickery, the way you treat your neighbor? No, there is no temple to the fertility god Ishtar in the midst of our town, but your lust

and your laughter at your neighbor's off-color joke proves that sexual immorality is alive and well.

With all that evil, all that immorality, all that idolatry, all that sin, why doesn't God just join forces with Jonah to hop on the boat, sail away, and overthrow us in His wrath?

The Bible answers that question for us. David writes in the Psalm, "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and all those who dwell therein" (Ps 24:1). The Prophet Joel describes God as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (2:13). St. Peter tells us the Lord is "patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pe 3:9).

The reason God does not overthrow Nineveh in His wrath is the same reason He does not overthrow you in His wrath. Because you belong to Him. He knit you together in your mother's womb. By nature, He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. By nature, He is patient, not wanting you to perish.

After Jonah hopped the boat to Tarshish, got thrown into the water, swallowed by the big fish, and spit back out, God came to him again and said, "Arise, go to Nineveh." And this time, Jonah went to Nineveh with the word of the Lord on his lips, "Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" He was not one day into that great city when Nineveh was overthrown, not by the wrath of God, but by the love of God. Through the preaching of that Word, the Holy Spirit did His work in the Ninevites and brought them to repentance, repentance which showed itself in fasting and sackcloth and ashes, from the greatest to the least, including the king and all his animals. They turned away from their sins and God forgave them.

Just like John describes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1). Really, isn’t that your story, as well?

If the world had a sign welcoming visitors, it would say something like this,

Welcome to the world, where all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Population: Poor, miserable sinners.

Into this evil fallen world, which God has every right to overthrow in His wrath without mercy, God sent a Prophet, who is true God and true man, His own Son Jesus Christ. He is the One God sends into your city and into your life, to call you to repentance.

Jesus does it by going on a 3-day journey. Friday, He took from you every all your immorality, your idolatry, your deceit, your scandal, your anger, your lies, all your sin and all your evil. He took it all upon Himself and went to Calvary’s cross, and there He bled and there He died and there all sins died with Him. Saturday, He rested in the tomb. On Sunday morning, He came forth from the tomb, alive, and victorious over all your sin, all your immorality, all your idolatry, all your deceit, all your scandal, all your anger, all your lies lies, and He comes to you and gives you His victory by means of His present-day prophets and their preaching, Baptism, and Holy Communion. For in and through these means, He calls you to repentance and forgives you all your sins.

Its a simple message, really: Jesus died for you. Jesus rose for you. Jesus ascended into heaven to prepare a home for you there.

With that simple message, the Holy Spirit has done His work in your life. He has overthrown you and your evil, not with God's wrath, but with His love, for He has brought you to repentance to forgive you all your sins.

What if each of us had a little sign on the door of our home, welcoming visitors? What would it say? I would propose to you that it could say simply this:

Welcome to my home. A house belonging to God in which the residents had had their evil overthrown by the love of God for them in Christ Jesus. Population: Forgiven.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.