

## “EXTREME MAKEOVER”

### Jonah 3

Jonah was a real person, not just an allegorical figure. You’ll find his name noted in the historical section of the Old Testament in 2 Kings chapter 14. He lived in Israel around 765 B.C. Now, as you may know, Hebrew names have meaning. And significantly, the name Jonah means “dove.” It’s significant because, long before the dove symbolized the Holy Spirit, even longer before it was a symbol of the peace movement, the dove was a symbol of Israel. Jonah = dove = Israel.

So the story of Jonah is not only a real-life story. It is also a kind of living parable about Israel – that peculiar, headstrong people, and their running battle of wills with God. This was the God who had chosen them for his own, who loved them, who had made plans for them, but to whom these people were all too inclined to say, as did Jonah when he headed for Tarshish, *“You undoubtedly have plans for us, God. But we’ve made other plans, and they don’t include you.”*

Jonah – that is, dove – that is, Israel. And if for no other reason than the fact that Scripture refers to the Church as the “new Israel,” there’s a profound sense in which the book of Jonah is our book. It is our story. Jonah is not some prophetic hero who escapes a close call and single-handedly transforms an evil empire. He’s a fallible, foot-dragging follower, a reluctant player in God’s great drama of salvation – like Israel and like every one of us. We are Jonah. Yet with patient resolve God kept working away at Jonah’s character, right up to the very last verse of the book; just as God works on us, patiently shaping us into the image of Christ, right up to our very last breath. We are Jonah. In the four chapters of this little book we see Jonah the prophet as prodigal, praying, preaching and, as we’ll learn next week, perturbed.

Jonah’s story began, you’ll remember, with God telling him to go to Nineveh, the capitol city of the brutal Assyrian Empire. It would be rather like telling Richard Simmons to go to the Al Quaida headquarters in Afghanistan and demand that they hand over Osama bin Laden. This assignment had all the makings of a suicide mission.

So, not surprisingly, Jonah headed west – in the opposite direction. He ran away. But then he got caught in a fierce Mediterranean storm. Realizing that he could no longer run away from his guilt, Jonah offered himself as a human sacrifice.

But God has a thing about human sacrifice. He always has. So the Lord sent an unlikely candidate, a great fish, to rescue Jonah from a watery grave.

There, sequestered for 72 hours in the womb-like belly of that sea monster, with nowhere to go and his options reduced to zero, Jonah prayed – prayed like he’d never prayed before. And as that fish vomited him onto the beach, Jonah had what we might call a genuine born-again experience. Which brings us to chapter three.

*1.* There are three lessons I want us to take to heart from this chapter. The first is that ***we are to speak God’s word***. Notice how the chapter 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.”*

I suspect that Jonah would have easily had a few things he would have been quite happy to say to the people of Nineveh. He would have remembered the injustices they had inflicted on his people. The stories, and perhaps memories, of suffering would be clear. And it was no secret that this was a city full of violence and sin and corruption. There was plenty Jonah could speak to. But that’s not what God expects from his prophets. What he demands is a servant-prophet who is willing to listen for the voice of the Master, and speak only as he is spoken to; to proclaim only as directed. And, may I remind you, we are Jonah.

As the body of Christ, we have a prophetic calling; we are called to speak. But speak what? I’m sure there’s much we could say. There’s much we could say in a general way to our families, our neighbors, our politicians. But what is it that God expects us to say at a particular moment to a given person in a specific setting?

I think of Jesus who, in Matthew chapter 12, compared himself to Jonah; talking about the Son of Man being three days and nights in the heart of the earth. Just two chapters earlier, in Matthew 10, he sent out his disciples with a prophetic commission. And as he sent them, he said, “...*do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say; for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*”

The role of the prophet is to listen for the inner prompting of God’s Spirit; for the divine voice directing what to say. That’s how it was for Jonah. So it was for the disciples. Why would it be any different for us? God expects us to bring a particular message for a particular place at a particular time; a message grounded in the timeless Word of God.

That is the challenge that faces anyone who would dare to preach. Frankly, it would be easy to find something – anything – to preach on. But that’s not the point. The question is: What is the Lord’s message right now for His dear people here at Westminster? That means I have to learn to listen, to discern the difference between my restless inner “Oh, just pick a topic!” voice and the “What would I want to hear?” voice and that still, small voice of God’s Spirit. I need to cultivate an awareness that God does speak, and that I need to be paying attention.

I'm not alone in this. We are Jonah. So let me ask you this. As you rub shoulders with colleagues at work or with your neighbor, do you take time to listen if the Lord might have a word for them through you? Perhaps it's a word of encouragement or challenge or hope. Maybe it's a verse of scripture or a line from a song.

And you leaders, you elders and deacons, are you learning to listen for God's voice? Are you praying for God's direction for the life of this congregation, for clarity as to where we should be moving in ministry, or perhaps where we should stop doing certain things, or where we need to wait? That's the first thing that we, that Jonah, must learn: to speak the word that God gives us.

2. The second lesson I pray we'll take to heart is that, like Jonah, ***we are to speak God's word IN the city***. At verse 3 it says: *Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city – a visit required three days. On the first day Jonah started into the city.* Notice that Jonah didn't stand at the city limits and shout at the city. He went into the city. He walked the streets, smelled the smells, saw the sights, heard the sounds, and ate the food. He was with them, among them, as God's representative in the gritty, real places where life is lived 24/7.

He wasn't sequestered in some tower, critiquing the city from a safe distance. He wasn't outside of town, sending the message in via a third party. He went into it himself, among the enemy, into that foreign culture, into that unsafe space, that uncomfortable territory, in a place where he might be challenged, where his hands and perhaps his soul might get dirty.

That's where God expected the prophet to go. And because we are Jonah, that's where God expects the Church to go: not hiding from the culture but engaging it; not hiding from our neighbors but welcoming them; not waiting until they come to us but finding ways to go to them; not insisting on comfortable and safe limits to ministry, or projects with a guaranteed, predictable payback. I wonder in how many ways the life of Westminster Church intersect the life of the city of Medford – and how much of it is merely a quiet, parallel existence at a safe distance.

3. The third lesson I want us to take to heart is that, since we are Jonah, ***we are to speak God's word eschatologically***. That's a twelve-dollar theological word that simply means looking forward to the end of things. It's when the chickens come home to roost; it's when the note becomes due and payable, when the fat lady sings. The word *eschaton* refers to what the Bible calls Judgment Day; to the point at which God takes the myriad strands of history and ties them all up. It refers to the time when Jesus is going to return as the undisputed ruler of all. And since we are Jonah, God expects us to speak eschatologically and live eschatologically.

What does that mean? It means that, despite all our best efforts to ignore the truth, things are not going to go on as they've always seemed to go. The day is coming when what we call human history will come to a grinding halt, and the Lord is going to sit in judgment. Are you ready for that? Are your neighbors ready if Jesus returns tonight? Are your parents ready? Are your kids ready? What are you going to do about it?

*“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!”* cried the prophet. Forty – it’s an interesting number. The Bible uses it to denote a time of preparation, of cleaning house, of equipping for a task. Noah spent forty days in the ark with his family while the earth was being cleansed of its sin. Israel was forty years in the wilderness – purging the nation of those who had rebelled against God’s order to enter Canaan, and preparing the next generation for the task of taking the land. Elijah hid in the wilderness forty days, where his failing health and tired soul and burned out heart were renewed, and he was given a fresh message from the Lord for Jezebel.

Immediately following his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness doing battle with Satan. There, it would seem, his mission was crystallized, and his inner resolve sharpened for three years of intense ministry as he prepared to walk the road to the cross. And then, after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and taught them for how many days? – Forty. It was the time they needed to wrap their minds around the incredible fact that even death couldn’t hold their Lord down. It was the time Jesus used to prepare them for the challenge of resurrection living in a world that could see no further than the grave.

In verse 4 it says: *Jonah cried, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned!” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust...* At verse 10 it says: *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.* Talk about an extreme makeover! It doesn’t say so, but I can’t help but think that neither Jonah nor the Ninevites could have known that God had taken pity on them until those forty days were up.

Forty more days! Someone has said that the first thirty-nine days are all preparation for the rubber-meets-the-road reality of the fortieth day. That is when it’s all put to the test. If the preparation is solid, that fortieth day will be the beginning of a new life. That’s how it was for Noah, and for Israel in Canaan, and for Jesus in ministry, and for the disciples in mission, and for Nineveh. But if the preparation is sloppy or non-existent, then that fortieth day won’t be the beginning of new life. It will be a day of no life, a day of reckoning and judgment.

We are Jonah. And because of that, there is a substantial sense in which the work of the Church is thirty-nine day work. Our job is to call people during this time of preparation for Jesus' return. How long will it be until he returns? We have not been given to know – although I watch world events and wonder how much longer things can keep going on.

But Jesus lingers. And as long as the Lord bides his time, we have a responsibility to get ourselves ready, and to share the hope of the gospel with others so that they can get ready as well. And whether they choose to heed our words or not is really immaterial. Jonah did his job, however reluctantly, and the effect was staggering. But regardless of the response he got, Jonah did what God told him to do. And we, too, are Jonah. What will we do? Will we run – or insulate ourselves – or will we speak God's word in this city and do it with the urgency it calls for?

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