

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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 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. He proclaimed: "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, but on sackcloth. 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."

Dear ministers of our Lord. Amen

Of all the miracles recorded in the Bible, which one is the greatest? That's kind of an unanswerable question, isn't it? It's like debating the greatest president in our country's history or the greatest invention of all time. There's really not a right answer. Some could argue the day when the sun "stood still," others when Moses parted the Red Sea, still others the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We could keep listing miracles till the cows come home, but we're never going to get a definitive answer.

What about in the story of Jonah? Surely, we can find the greatest miracle in this story, right? It's rather obvious, isn't it? The whole reason most people know about Jonah is because of the great miracle which involved him. And what's the miracle? Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed whole by a great fish inside which Jonah spends three days and then gets spit out on dry land perfectly fine. There's really no debate on this one...or is there?

While there's certainly no debate that Jonah's adventure inside the fish is the most famous of the miracles recorded in this short book, I would argue that it's not the greatest. The greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is what happens after Jonah gets out of the fish. It's what happens when, **"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."** The greatest miracle was that:

Sermon Theme: God's Word Works True Repentance!

- 1. It works faith in sinful hearts**
- 2. It leads us to trusts in Jesus' forgiveness**

Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh." If Google existed back then and you searched Nineveh, you'd have found entries like this: "Nineveh: Money Magazine's top place to live in the 700's B.C." "Nineveh: the ancient world's New York, on steroids." "Nineveh: more power grubbers per capita than inside Washington D.C." Nineveh was a power hungry, money chasing, culture creating city. And while we might have to guess what the world's headlines would have been for Nineveh, we don't have to guess how God felt about it. Straight from the Bible, God said, "Nineveh: the city of blood," "Nineveh: the city of lies, the city of plunder, the city never without victims." Nineveh was a nasty, sinful place.

Not to mention that these nasty, sinful people were special enemies of Israel. As much as American's loathe ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Israel had much worse feelings about Nineveh, and for good reason. Nineveh was more powerful and in some ways even more evil than modern terrorists. So when God tells Jonah to head for Nineveh and to preach the Word to them, you can understand why Jonah, Israel's prophet, is shocked and troubled. You can understand why he ran away the first time. However, after he came out of the fish, **“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 obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.”**

And what was the message that God had Jonah proclaim? **“Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”**

How many lunatic “preachers” do you think there are in New York City screaming about the end of the world? Isn't that what you think of when you hear about Jonah walking the streets of Nineveh? Wouldn't you expect him to get the same reception? Think about it? What's the likelihood of anyone from Nineveh listening to a Jewish prophet predicting the overthrow of their great and mighty city? At best, Jonah would be lucky if everyone ignored him or laughed at him or called him crazy. At worst, he wouldn't leave the city alive.

But that's where this story flips the script. You can hardly believe what you read in verse 5. **“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”** In what can only be described as a miracle, these horrible, nasty, sinful people listened to Jonah. And not only that, they believed what God was saying through him. And not only that, but their belief, which again can only be described as an unimaginable miracle, prompted them to actions associated with sadness and mourning. They didn't eat. They put on the mourners clothes. They showed by word and deed that they had taken the Word of the LORD to heart.

But perhaps, that's not even the greatest of the miracles. Listen to what God does. **“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.”** It sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? The movie writers wouldn't take a script like this. It's not realistic, even by Hollywood's standards. Yet, this is reality. This is truth. This is the power that God's Word contains. The Word works true repentance.

If I asked you to picture the worst sinner you knew in your mind, who might it be? How many of you said the worst of sinners is yourself? Too often in this life, we are told that everyone is good and everyone has “good” in them. We're encouraged to think highly of ourselves, to raise up our self-esteem. At worst, we're just a little rough around the edges and with a little refining, a little self-control, a little will-power, a nip here and a tuck there we'll be the good people. But that's not the truth. Everyone is not good. Everyone does not have good in them. God tells us in his Word that there is no good thing residing in us, that is in our sinful nature. There is no one who is good in our a sinful nature, not even one! Our sinful nature or Old Adam is 100% sinful and will always be that way. That's the truth. We may look around at our world and what happens in the bigger cities and in faraway nations and somehow think that we're better than they. There's no way that we can be compared to Nineveh, right? Right?

You know now that's not right. We're just like Nineveh. In our sinful nature, we're just like Nineveh. We're power hungry, money chasing, God avoiding sinners—just like Nineveh. And anyone who tells you different is lying. And that's why God has sent his Word into our lives. For just like in Nineveh, the Word works true repentance. Just like in Nineveh, when you hear the Word of God, you're cut to the heart by God's Law. You know your sins. You know what you deserve—an eternity in hell—and it scares you to death. You are genuinely sorry for your sins, for your unfaithfulness to God, for your apathy for his Word, for your indifference for his work. But God's Word not only cuts, it heals. And so, just like Nineveh, you hear the Word of God that says, "I forgive you all of your sins because of Jesus." And just like Nineveh, you're moved by God's unbelievable mercy to say thank you to him. Empowered by God's love, you sing your hymns of praise, you dedicate your lives to serving God wherever he's placed you, you do your best to make his Word part of your everyday life, you make his work a priority.

That's the power of God's Word. It helps you to overcome your sinful nature. But this is a daily struggle. Paul has some strong words in Romans chapter 7. **"So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members."** You are at war! This isn't a lover's spat. This is war. If you try to deal with your sinful nature as a reformation project or a rehabilitation case, you're going to lose every time. Your sinful nature can't be reformed, it can't be rehabilitated. There's only one way to deal with your sinful nature. It's to drown it. It's to drown it with daily sorrow over your sins, with daily trust in God's forgiveness. It's to beat it to death with the promises found in God's Word.

Jesus once said in Matthew, **"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But now will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."**

The greatest miracle in this whole story is the mercy of God in calling Nineveh to repentance through the preaching of Jonah. And guess what? It is no less a miracle that God in his mercy calls you to repentance through the preaching of his Word. In fact, it's just as great a miracle. Each and every week, we overcome our sinful nature when we listen to God's Word, when we confess our sins and trust in the forgiveness that the one greater than Jonah, that Jesus has won.

In view of that great miracle, in view of that undeserved love, in view of God's incredible mercy, let's emulate those people of Nineveh by showing fruits of repentance. Instead of fasting, let's feast on the bread of Life, the Word of God by making worship and Bible study a priority. Instead of sackcloth, let's put on the armor of God to defend against every attack the devil, the world, and our sinful nature will fire against us. Let's show our thankfulness to God by supporting his work with our time and our talents and our first-fruit offerings. And let's emulate Jonah, who though at first unwilling, listened to the Lord and shared the Word with those who desperately needed to hear it! Let's invite more and more to witness one of the greatest miracles they'll ever see! Let's offer them the only thing that will help them overcome their sinful nature, the Word of God, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ! AMEN