

Title: *An Unlikely Repentance*

Text: Jonah 3

Just to play a word association game with you for a moment, what comes into your head when you hear the word repent or the word repentance? Do you think of a hellfire and brimstone preacher getting red in the face and wagging his finger in your face telling you, “REPENT!!?”

Is it a painful reminder of past failures and perhaps how God had to bring you through some tough times to accomplish His work in your life?

Are you reminded of the promise in Isaiah, “‘Come let us reason together,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they can be as white as wool.’”

Frederica Mathewes-Greene says, “The first time Jesus appears, in the first Gospel, the first instruction he gives is “Repent.”

From then on, it's his most consistent message. In all times and every situation, his advice is to repent. Not just the scribes and Pharisees, not just the powerful—he tells even the poor and oppressed that repentance is the key to eternal life. Repentance is a gracious gift of God that allows us to experience his mercy when we know we deserve judgment. It simply means turning around. It means a change of heart and a change of attitude that indicated by a change of behavior.

Another way to get into what I want to talk about this morning would be to ask, “What was the biggest failure of your Christian life or experience?”

Maybe you're haunted by a missed opportunity, a poor decision, or some indiscretion in your past. Maybe there's a gnawing sense that God's through with me. Anyone who would do what I've done or miss the opportunity that I've missed, would God even want to use me? Have I gone too far and been placed on the shelf?

One of the subtitles of the book of Jonah could be *The God of the Second Chance*. Let's remember that Jonah deliberately defied and flouted the call of God that had come to him. He did more than just dig in his heels and say, “I don't want to.” It wasn't just passive resistance. It was active disobedience. He turned tail and went off in the opposite direction.

He kind of threw the mother of all temper tantrums when, in effect, he said, “I'd rather die than do what God's called me to.”

It's one thing for your children to sort of passively ignore you – you know, say, “Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” and then just sit there and ignore what you've told them. It's another for them to be just willfully defiant.

Sometimes you stand your ground and say, “You will not get any more privileges and perks until you do what you were told to do in the first place.” Other times, you say, “I was going to take you to the movies, but since you refused to do what I told you, I'll go to the movies without you, or I'll take someone else.”

It's a little bit like the parable Jesus told of the two sons. The father went to each of his

two sons and said, "I need you to work in my vineyard today. The one said, "Nope. Not going to do it. I've got plans for today and they don't include you." The younger son said, "I was just thinking during my quiet time that it's been a while since I've worked in the vineyard and because I'm so blessed to be a part of this wonderful family, I'm going to go and work extra hard today so that your vineyard is all that it can be."

The problem is that the one who had the bad attitude and refused to go at first was the one who went to work in the vineyard and the one who was so sickeningly sweet about his attitude and desire to help his family didn't do a blessed thing.

The point of the parable, as I take it, is that it doesn't matter where you begin as much as it matters where you end up. Now that's just the nub of it. There's a lot more that could be said about the parable. It's interesting that Jonah would be in the category of the son who said, "Not going to do it. You can't make me. No way. I'd rather die," but the ultimately after much weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth, did what he'd been told to do in the first place.

How much pain and aggravation could Jonah have been spared if he had simply said yes and gotten on with what God had called him to do? What's interesting though is that the text says that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. It does not say that it came to him a second time with a big, "I told you so."

What would it mean to you to hear those words for a second time, "You think you've blown it, but I have an assignment for you." Why would God Sometimes we confuse grace with being a pushover. We might be tempted to think, after what Jonah's been through, I'll let him off the hook this time. I'll find someone else.

Not everyone gets a second chance. There are times that there is a moment of opportunity and it has our name written all over it but then the moment passes. One of the things that ought to keep us awake at night is the thought that I could miss God. Think of the words of Mordecai to Esther, "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape.<sup>14</sup> For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

I've heard enough missionary sermons and been to enough missionary conventions that I've heard it said, "If we don't go, how will they hear?" That's an excellent question. I've also heard it said, "If you don't say yes to God, He'll give the blessing to someone else." It is true that sometimes what God asks us to do doesn't get done if we don't do it and that sometimes he just hands the blessing that he intended off to someone else.

After what Jonah has just been through though, do you think there's any chance that he would run again or say no to God's call? The way God framed this message is a little bit different this time. In chapter 1 he says, "Go to that great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me." No more daunting or intimidating assignment has ever been given when you consider who Jonah was and who the Ninevites were.

A Hebrew prophet going to preach against the superpower of his day, the superpower which would eventually over run his own nation and wipe it off the face of the map. This time, he's simply told, "Just go and tell them whatever I tell you." I remember an old hymn that the congregation used to sing in my student pastorate in Indiana. If Jesus goes with me I'll go. Jonah came to understand that if God would be with him and would give him the message to deliver, he could do whatever was asked of him.

What did repentance look like for Jonah? Was it in self-loathing and bad feelings. Just beating himself up and making him feel bad about himself? Who knows how much of that went on in his mind. After all, 3 days in the belly of a fish would sure get you thinking and one of the things you would think about is, "How in the world did I ever get into this mess?"

For Jonah, though, repentance is seen in verse 3. Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. It's amazing how much you can learn from being a parent. Christopher has started this thing of when we tell him not to do something and he does it anyway or we tell him to do something and he just sits there, if we say something to him again, he'll say, "But I love you." To which we reply, "If you love us, you'll obey us and do as you're told."

To repent does mean to have a change of mind or a change of attitude about something that will result in a change of behavior. It is stopping your rebellion against God and looking to him for the grace and strength to follow through on what he's told you to do. It's turning from living for yourself to living for Him. Getting rid of your own agendas and living your life for him.

Nineveh was a huge, imposing place. It's not hard to understand why Jonah didn't want to go there. The sheer size of the place was intimidating. They were fierce and ruthless in battle. They were not Hebrews or God-fearers. They worshiped Ishtar. They were the regional superpower and Jonah was from a small, insignificant country that they were about to overrun.

The writer tells us that Nineveh was an exceeding great city. The next chapter tells us that there were 120,000 in the city. We don't think of that as being all that big in these days. But in those days, that would be a big deal. Some have suggested that in ancient diplomacy, there was a technical diplomatic term that referred to big cities as "three-day cities." The writer doesn't use a precise term to give us the precise measurements because that's not the point. The point of the story was that this was a big, imposing, intimidating, powerful place.

If you're going to preach in a big, imposing, intimidating powerful place, you need a big imposing, intimidating, powerful sermon. You need to learn all of the best rhetorical practices to gain their attention and to keep it and to communicate the message in such a way that they not only hear it, they act on it.

Jonah preached one of the shortest, most succinct sermons in history. 5 words in Hebrew, 8 words in English. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." Someone once said that no one sleeps at the reading of a will if they think there may be something in it for them. Even when such a short message is empowered and driven by the Spirit of God, it is able to resonate

with people and they knew that they had to do something to get their act together. It's not in the wisdom or the skill of the one doing the speaking but it is in the empowering of the Spirit of God and conviction that he brings.

He brings a warning and you're almost tempted to think that Jonah's heart isn't really in it. He's just doing what he has to do because God has so prevailed upon him that he doesn't have much choice in the matter except as to whether he's going to obey grudgingly or happily. Eugene Peterson said, "Jonah had a child-sized plan that did not pan out; God was enacting a huge destiny that surprised everyone." He may not have really cared what happened to the Ninevites, but God did.

It's really interesting that these people didn't really worship Jonah's God and when Jonah comes and says, "40 more days and Nineveh will be destroyed, it resonates with the people. Jonah doesn't say, "Repent," but it is the implied message of what he is saying. Unless you repent, Nineveh will be destroyed in 40 days.

The Ninevites didn't follow Jonah's God, but they believed him and they said, "We've got to do something. They did the only thing they knew to do. They declared a fast and they put on sackcloth. This wasn't just restricted to one group or class of people. It was all of them. There is something deep inside of us that knows we're sinners, that is able to recognize when we've gone our own way independent of What God wants and expects. Most of us – unless our conscience has been seared with a hot iron – have some sort of conviction that they're doing wrong. Paul writes about God's judgment in Romans and he says, "<sup>14</sup> (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, <sup>15</sup> since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)"

The point is that there is some place down deep inside of each of us where God speaks to our conscience since we are created in his image and we know that certain things are right and certain things are wrong and when it's pointed out to us, we know that we need to repent. They were so grieved over their sinful and evil practices that they refrained from eating anything. They put on the coarse sackcloth as a sort of reminder to them that they couldn't remain comfortable in their sin.

The king got involved in the action of repentance. He put on the sack cloth and sat down in the dust. It's as if he says, "For someone who's done what I've done I can't sit on a comfortable, luxurious chair. I need just to sit and grovel in the dust." He realized that all of their power and might was not sufficient to save them when they stood before a holy God.

He issues a proclamation that said, "'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup> But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his

fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

The king recognizes that this is a national crisis so he call for national repentance. Let’s show forth some fruit of repentance and call on God and ask Him if perhaps he will relent and have compassion and turn his fierce anger from us.

And what is amazing is that God has grace even on a wicked, fearsome people like the Ninevites. The prophet saying what is going to happen isn’t saying, “This is definitely going to happen.”

Jeremiah 18 says, “<sup>7</sup> If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, <sup>8</sup> and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. <sup>9</sup> And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, <sup>10</sup> and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

We can look at the state of affairs in our own nation and pray that perhaps God will send a Jonah to give us a wake-up call. I think America is a great country but we are certainly not where God wants us to be on the morality scale. I saw recently where 41% of all pregnancies in New York City end in abortion. We believe there is something fundamentally good and great about America, that we have that potential to be the shining city on a hill first spoken of by John Winthrop back in 1630 and later spoken of by Ronald Reagan. This isn’t intended to be a “God and country” sermon. The point I’m making is about the need for repentance. The Ninevites repented and Jesus, as we read last week said that they would rise up against his own nation at the judgment because they repented at the preaching of Jonah.

The bigger question is, “what about you, what about me?” How many opportunities is God going to have to give you before you surrender your heart and your life and your will to him?

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