

“Nineveh? You Must Be Joking!”

Jonah 1:1-17

Have you ever asked your children to do something they didn't want to do? Maybe it's just our family, but usually these requests are not met with a lot of enthusiasm. Either there is lots of moaning and complaining, or our children suddenly remember that they have something else to do, that is super important. Hardly ever do I get a “of course, mother dearest, right away”. Actually, that kind of response usually requires a bit of prompting. Our children might not see the necessity or benefit of what we are asking them to do, so they drag their feet. Despite their reluctance we count on them to comply with our request, even if it takes a second or a third invitation to do so.

I can only remember one time, where one of my children decided to come before he was asked to. Ironically, that child was our youngest son, Jonah. He decided to show his chubby little face a little more than three weeks before we expected him to arrive. His name sake in the Bible, the prophet Jonah, responded much more like my kids do now.

Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel from 793-753 BC. As we heard in our text, God asked him to take a message to Nineveh, one of the biggest cities in Assyria at the time. Assyria was feared throughout the ancient near East. At the time of Jonah, it was growing more and more powerful and the Israelites were afraid they would be conquered by Assyria. In their eyes Nineveh was nothing but an evil city within an evil empire. Historians tell us about boastful inscriptions of Assyrian monuments that describe the torture and slaughter of people who opposed them.

So, Jonah had good reasons for not wanting to go to Israel’s enemies and preach against their evils so they would not be destroyed for their wickedness. Jonah disagreed with God and wanted Nineveh to be crushed. Instead of following God’s command, he decided not to obey and run the other way. He set out by boat to Tarshish. A lot of us know the story, but sometimes it is hard to visualize how far apart Nineveh and Tarshish were. The map on the screen shows the city of Joppa, where Jonah boarded the ship bound for Tarshish, which is on the far west side of the map, in Spain on the western side of the Straights of Gibraltar. 2500 miles away from Joppa. It was about as far away from Nineveh, which is 550 miles East of Joppa, as you could get. Jonah tried to get away, not just from Nineveh, but also from God. 3000 miles. In his mind that was far enough away.

But it really is not that easy to run from God. While Jonah was asleep on the boat, a huge storm came up and threatened to capsize the vessel. The sailors tried to save their ship by throwing their load overboard, but it didn’t help. Eventually, they casted lots and determined that Jonah was the reason for the storm. He admitted that he was running from God and was indeed the culprit. They reluctantly threw him into the sea and God calmed the storm. At this point God could have left Jonah to die in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea and send another prophet to Nineveh. But that is not what happened. Instead he sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah.

Inside the fish Jonah thanked God for not abandoning him and promised to obey him from this point on. God accepted his almost-apology and caused the fish to vomit Jonah up on dry land three days later.

Once again God called Jonah. This time Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh. Jonah delivered his short sermon “Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overturned!” in every neighborhood, marketplace, and at every city gate for three days straight. Even though Jonah never mentioned Nineveh’s sin or how they should respond to God, the Ninevites repented and asked God for forgiveness.

Jonah had assumed that “Nineveh shall be overturned” meant that they were destined for destruction, but God knew they would be transformed and change their ways. Jonah left the city to watch the destruction of his enemies. He realized that God did indeed show the Ninevites mercy, but stubbornly sat on a hill in the sun to see if God would change his mind. God commanded a vine to grow to provide Jonah with shade and protection. When God let a worm gnaw on it and it wilted, Jonah threw an outright temper tantrum. He asked God to just kill him.

God remained patient and asked Jonah if his anger was justified (Jonah 4:4,9). Jonah was not easily swayed and insisted on the unfairness of it all. Instead of giving us a resolution to Jonah’s quandary, the book ends with a loaded question: Aren’t humans more valuable than vines? Shouldn’t God be more concerned about that great city of Nineveh?

Wow, what a story! Jonah is an unusual book in the Bible. As I briefly mentioned, it is considered a prophetic book, but it is the only one that consists entirely of an account of what happened to the prophet. The whole prophetic message is told through the story and the dialogue between God and Jonah.

While the story is about the city of Nineveh in Assyria, the Ninevites were not the intended audience. The book is written to address the Israelites of the time. The prophets were constantly complaining that the Israelites failed to respond to their messages, but this book shows the feared enemies, the mighty Assyrians, responding immediately to Jonah’s extremely short message: “In 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown!” Jonah did not have to explain to them why God was angry with them, the Ninevites knew. Even their mighty king knew how powerful the God of the Israelites was. He ordered for the whole city to mourn and fast. From the highest official, through the lowest servant, all the way to the beasts in the field. He understood that repentance was their only chance at mercy.

So, this is where the question as to the intent of this story poses itself to me. Why do the Israelites need to know the story of the prophet Jonah and the response of the Ninevites? Was this whole book written to rebuke the nation of Israel and to teach them to repent like the Ninevites did?

Let’s take a closer look at the conversation between God and Jonah. The part of the story that we read earlier only tells us that Jonah “got up to flee to Tarshish from the LORD’s presence.” (1:3) When we read the beginning of chapter four however, we find the reason Jonah ran from God. In verse 2 he told God that he knew he was a “merciful and compassionate God, slow to become angry, rich in faithful love, and One who relents from sending disaster.” That is the true reason why he tried to flee to Tarshish.

Jonah tried to run away from God to where he thought he couldn't reach because he already knew that God would forgive the Ninevites if they repented. Let that sink in for a moment.

This gives us a glimpse at how the Israelites felt about those outside of the covenant with God: They believed God should be unconcerned with all gentiles. But God chose to show Jonah and the rest of the Israelites that that is not true.

God cares about our repentant hearts.

What an important reminder. What is in our hearts is more important than our heritage. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:44 to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. It's relatively easy to admiringly talk about this commandment, but how practical is that in our daily lives?

Forgiveness, kindness, compassion – Are those words we commonly associate with people who have hurt us? Those who have the potential to hurt us? The book of Jonah does just that. God instructed the prophet to love his enemies in Nineveh. True to life, Jonah did the exact opposite: He refused to go to those he hated and tried to run away. He did not want to warn the Ninevites about their impending destruction and give them a chance to repent because he feared that God would forgive them. Despite the Assyrians cruel ways, God loved the city of Nineveh and wanted to save it from his rightful wrath, just like he had intended for Sodom and Gomorrah. God knew Nineveh was ready for a change. Even though the Ninevites were cruel and hardened, they responded immediately to Jonah's message in a way Israel never had.

When we look closer at the Israelites and the Ninevites, can we draw parallels to our own lives? How are our own attitudes like those of Jonah and the ancient Israelites? Do we only care about our own faith? Is ministry only important if it relates to us personally, or our racial or ethnic group? What about age or economic status? Are there groups of people that it's easier not to extend our love to?

These are some tough questions. As United Methodists we are called to have open hearts, open minds, and open doors. We are called to extend our love to those around us regardless of creed, gender, age, heritage, or socio-economic status.

As some of you know, I was not born in the US. I did not move here until I married Eric at 23 years old. What most of you might not be aware of is the fact that I was born in the German Democratic Republic. For the first ten years of my life I grew up in a socialist country. I was taught that the Soviet Army had delivered East Germany from the evil of national-socialism. They were our friends and protectors. I was taught that Americans were greedy and power hungry, that the US did not believe in ensuring a good life for all of their citizens. When I was ten years old, the country had been in a quiet uproar. Simple things had shifted.

To this day I remember November 9th, 1989 vividly. We were on our way to my grandparents' house for my grandfather's birthday the next day. None of the radio programs we usually listened to were on, every single station was talking about the protests all over our country. It was scary. The next morning, I woke up to a new reality. The borders were open. We could now travel, if we wanted to, not just East but also West.

The next year was crazy. All of our books in school were replaced by new books. History we had previously learned about was now told from a slightly different angle. Russian was no longer the language you automatically had to take starting in 5th grade. We now had a choice. A choice.

All those things changed my outlook on the world. I still lived in the same area that I had lived in, although we moved 7 miles East to the house my parents were finally able to build. We were using different money, had choices when it came to food and goods and services, we were free to travel, getting a higher education was now not only a dream but a true possibility. People, who I had been taught were our enemies, now were friends.

I have been richly blessed by living through the times I lived through. I have never taken anything for granted and always strive to do my best. When Eric and I decided to get married, we had to jump through a lot of hoops to make it happen. I had to apply for a fiancé visa, which is not easy, nor cheap to obtain. It involves doctor visits, forms, fingerprints, recommendations, pictures, a sponsor, and an interview at the US embassy. When I finally received my sealed package and my passport with my visa, we breathed a huge sigh of relief only to be shocked to find out that a stamp was missing on one of the forms in the sealed package. I was fortunate to be proficient enough in my English language skills to explain to the border patrol officer at the airport in Detroit, that I had no way of knowing that the stamp was missing as he was the one who opened the package. I was also able to point out to him that I did have the visa in my passport and it showed the date and stamp that was missing in the package.

Even after Eric and I got married, we still had a long way to go for me to get my temporary green card. It took almost a year to get that. Then the 10-year green card two years later. A short time later we decided that we did not want to have to deal with all of that anymore and we went through the naturalization process for me. That was very frustrating, but on June 14th, 2007 I became a citizen of the United States.

So what? Why am I telling you all of this? What does that have to do with the book of Jonah? While I was not born in Assyria and this is not Israel, I was born in a country on the wrong side of a wall. A wall that was built to separate people, a wall that turned people into enemies. When I was born nobody would ever have dreamed that I could live the life I live now. But my life changed, because there were people who cared and bravely did what needed to be done for a nation to change.

Church, we have a choice in our walk with Christ. We can walk alongside him and love those that are different from us. We can extend a helping hand, even if we are not entirely sure how we feel about the people we are helping. We can let go of grudges and love those who have deeply offended or hurt us. Is it easy? No, most certainly not. But, we can willingly open our lives to God’s grace, compassion, and love. We can respond to the message that runs all through the Bible, from the Old Testament to the New Testament:

God wants us to love him deeply and wholly, and he wants us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.