

Sermon for January 21, 2024 – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5,10 (EHV)

Theme: God Wants You to Witness His Word

- 1) Because the people of this place are important to God.
- 2) Because time is short and destruction is near
- 3) Because God forgives all who repent and believe

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ²“Get up. Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh just as the word of the LORD had commanded. Now Nineveh was a great city to God. It required a three-day walk. ⁴Jonah walked through the city for a day, and he called out, “Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!” ⁵The men of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least. . . ¹⁰When God saw their actions, that they had turned from their evil way, God relented from the disaster which he said he would bring on them, and he did not carry it out.

There are around 1 million people in Ottawa. How important are they to you? Do you tolerate them enough to bite your tongue when they annoy you? Do you care for them enough to help them when they are in need? Are they important enough to pray for? Do you love them enough to try to save them from hell?

God loves every soul living in our city. They are so precious to him that He sent Jesus to suffer and die for all their sins. This city is so precious to God that 150 years ago, He gathered a congregation of believers called St. Paul Lutheran Church and commissioned them to call our city's citizens to repentance and faith in Jesus.

You, brothers and sisters in Christ, are the fruits and heirs of those believers God gathered so long ago. Throughout the decades, faithful members of St. Paul and its daughter congregations of Divine and Abiding Word have dedicated their time, talents, and treasures so that these congregations might be a light in the Ottawa Valley. Proof of this fact is you, sitting here, worshipping Jesus.

And now the baton has been passed. You are the ones holding it. God wants you to continue the work he had them start. **God wants you to witness His word** in the Ottawa Valley. Why? Because, as we will learn through the example of Jonah's ministry to Nineveh: *1) the people of this place are important to God. 2) Because time is short and destruction is near. 3) Because God forgives all who repent and believe in Him for salvation.*

Part One: Because the people of this place are important to God.

Our sermon text begins: *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2“Get up. Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”*

Yes, this was the second time God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Do you remember what happened the first time? Jonah tried to run away from God. The LORD, however, sent a storm to stop the boat he was in, had the sailors throw him into the sea, and, when Jonah was on the brink of death – repenting of his sin – God sent a fish to swallow him alive. After spending three days in the fish, praising God for His salvation, the LORD caused the fish to vomit him out onto dry land.ⁱ

Someone might wonder: “Why did Jonah try to run away from his duty to preach to Nineveh?” Let me explain it this way: What would your reaction be if the LORD told you to preach to HAMAS or Boko Haram? You see, the nation Nineveh represented (the Assyrians) was more brutal than those groups! They were the terror of the ancient world – Israel’s enemies who, some 60 years later, would be so thorough in conquering and resettling the people in Northern Israel that 10 of its 12 tribes would be lost for the rest of human history.

Humanly speaking, it was apparent why Jonah hated Nineveh. But the LORD loved that city, as verse 3 of our text states: *Nineveh was a great city to God.* The people of that city were important to Him.

But these were the very people who would brutally kill and disperse Israel. Why would Nineveh be important to God? Because when the LORD looked at Nineveh, He saw 120,000 husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. . . all of whom were his children through creation but estranged through sin and unbelief. Yes, they were evil - angering him with their thoughts and actions. Nevertheless, he pitied them. Why? Because he saw 120,000 souls about to die and go to hell. Therefore, He sent His prophet Jonah to warn Nineveh of the real danger that threatened them.

When God looks at Ottawa, what does He see? 1 million souls, some of whom trust in him for salvation, but many others do not. When God looks at Ottawa, He sees many of his children through creation who are estranged from him. He sees all their sin and hates it. He also sees the danger that threatens them and wants to save them from it. That is why God has commissioned you (yes, you!) to share His Word with your family, friends, and neighbours. He wants you to call them to repentance and faith. Why? Because the people of this place are important to Him. And time is short: destruction is near.

Part Two: Because time is short and destruction is near

Yes, God has called you to confess His Word to your community. When did He do this? When God called you to faith! The Bible says that the LORD saved you for a purpose: to *proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*ⁱⁱ God has called every Christian to represent Christ on this earth - wanting us to use the opportunities He gives us to share His Gospel through our words and actions because time is short.

Jonah's message to Nineveh was: *"Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!"* That didn't leave the Ninevites any time to waste. They needed to repent now if they wanted to avoid God's judgment!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: much time has passed since Jesus made his ascension promise to return soon. Nevertheless, the devil, the world, and our sinful nature try to convince us that Christ's return is nothing to concern ourselves with. "Sure, it would be good for me to get back into the habit of going to worship, But I can start that next week or month." "Yes, I should talk to my daughter about her living arrangements with her boyfriend, but I don't want to wreck my relationship with her. Maybe I should give it some more time." "Yes, I am concerned with my neighbour's total lack of faith in Jesus, but he's a nice guy. I don't want our relationship to be soured, so I'll wait. We have time."

Do we really have time?

Jesus said: *"I am coming soon!"*ⁱⁱⁱ Take some time to meditate on Matthew 24 and note all the signs that precede Christ's return. Except for the things that will happen on that day, every one of them has been fulfilled. Every day that passes brings us closer to Judgment Day. Time is running out.

"But," someone might say, "when I tried talking to my family, friends, and neighbours in the past, it quickly became uncomfortable. They all know I am a Christian, so can't I just let them bring up the subject when they are ready? I don't want to create awkwardness in our relationship."

Penn Jillette (from the comedy/magician group Penn and Teller) is an outspoken atheist. A few years back, he spoke about how a Christian businessman talked with him after a show and handed him a Bible with a note inside. Penn truly respected the man for what he did. No, Penn Jillette is not a Christian. He is still an outspoken atheist, but he both respected and defended that Christian man's attempt to proselytize him from atheism by saying: *"If you believe that there's a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell—or not getting eternal life or whatever—and you think that, well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward. . . . How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"*

So, let me ask you again: how important are the people of Ottawa to you? Do you love your family, friends, and neighbours enough to want to save them from hell – even if it might mean you will be seen as socially awkward? I can tell you right now – your family, friends and neighbours are very important to God. That is precisely why he chose you to live among them and gave you His Word to witness to them. Time is running out, and destruction is near. Therefore, share the message God has given you because God forgives all who look to him in repentance and faith.

Part Three: Because God forgives all who repent and believe.

Jonah sinned when he tried to run away from his calling to speak God's Word to Nineveh. We sin also when we do not use the opportunities God places before us to share his Gospel with others. God humbled Jonah – leading him to recognize his sin and repent. God also uses his law to humble

us, leading us to repent of all the times that we, out of fear, laziness, or for any other reason, don't witness the Gospel when given the chance. Do you know what God does when we repent? The same thing He did for Jonah: he forgives us for Jesus' sake. He reassures us of his love and tells us to use the opportunities he puts in our lives to share His soul-saving Word with those around us.

And notice what Jonah did in the peace of God's forgiveness: *So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh just as the word of the LORD had commanded. . . and he called out, "Forty more days and Nineveh is going to be overthrown!"*

Jonah didn't sugar-coat God's message or shy away from telling the truth. He spoke the Word God told him to speak. From a worldly point of view, it may have seemed like a foolish message, but look at its effect!

⁵The men of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least.

The Ninevites believed the God who warned them. They repented of their sins. Not only did they express genuine sorrow over their sins, but they expressed this sorrow in the hope that God would be merciful to them. And this repentance wasn't a mere show either. They truly turned from their evil ways – as the last verse of our text indicates:

¹⁰When God saw their actions, that they had turned from their evil way, God relented from the disaster which he said he would bring on them, and he did not carry it out.

Look at the LORD's mercies and marvel: a nation as godless and violent as today's worst terrorist groups was brought to its knees through the simple witness of God's Word. The people repented, God forgave them, and thousands of souls were saved!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: the LORD has not asked you to call HAMAS to repentance and faith, but he has called you to share His Word in your community. The people around you are special to Him. He wants them to be saved. But how should you witness to them? What do you say?

It's really not all that complicated. Simply speak the truth in love. Don't be afraid to warn people about their sins – urging them to repent so they can be forgiven. Moreover, don't be scared to tell people what God has done to save them. Tell them about Jesus, his love, and what he did on the cross to forgive them. God will work through your simple sharing of that message to bring people to repentance. No, not everyone you speak to will believe. Some will reject the Gospel you share. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit will move others through the Word you speak. They will repent of their sins, and God will forgive and save them.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, may the Holy Spirit move all of us to honestly care for those around us sharing the Gospel of Christ with them. Why? Because the people of this place are important to God. Because time is short and destruction is near. Most importantly, because God forgives all who repent and believe in His Son. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Jonah 1-2

ⁱⁱ 1 Peter 2:9, EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 22:20 EHV