

Urban Repentance

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[0 : 00] From the scripture readings, you may have noticed that we're still in the book of Jonah. We're not going anywhere for another couple weeks. Over the last two Sundays, we did cover the whole book, though.

Dan covered two Sundays ago chapters 1 and 2, and last week, Jeremy covered chapters 3 and 4. And the reason why we did this is because they were family services, and we wanted the kids to get the whole picture of the book of Jonah, the whole vision, instead of just getting part of it. But we still have two weeks left. So what we're going to be doing over the next two Sundays is, I'm going to be diving into chapter 3 this Sunday, and Dan, next week, is going to be diving into chapter 4.

And basically what that means is we're going to repeat everything that Jeremy said last week, except in a whole lot more words, which is every preacher's dream.

Now, through Dan and Jeremy's preaching, you've probably discovered by now that the book of Jonah is about a lot more than a rogue missionary being swallowed up by a big fish. The book of Jonah is huge.

[1 : 06] It's about who God is, most fundamentally. It wants to give us a vaster vision of God. And secondarily, it's about how we should respond to God.

And in particular, Jonah 3 talks about the response of repentance. And in talking about repentance, it draws us right into the very heart of the Christian life.

Turning from sin. All actions and affections and attitudes that don't align with the truth of Jesus Christ and trusting that God will have mercy on us.

Repentance right at the heart of the Christian life. October 31st, 1517, a man who was a monk and a professor named Martin Luther nailed something famously called the 95 Theses onto a big wooden door of a church in Wittenberg.

Now, if you know anything about that time, when he did that, it was like striking a match and putting it to dry tinder. And it started something called the Protestant Revolution, which has utterly transformed Western society and history.

[2 : 21] Martin Luther originally wrote in Latin because he was trying to have a theological debate over 95 points with his fellow professors. But people got hold of it, translated it into common language of German.

And if you know your history, the printing press had just been invented. And so this thing spread like wildfire. But what is often not seen is what the pastoral concern of what Martin Luther was on about. In his very first thesis in the 95 that he put up on the door, he said this. He said, When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent, he intended that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.

The entire life of believers. And Luther didn't make this up. He just got it from Jesus' very first sermon, Matthew chapter 4. Behold, Jesus says, The kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe the gospel. And Martin Luther's great concern was that we would see repentance not simply as a one-time inaugural experience or something for the super spiritually mature or something for special occasions like Sundays or today, but that we'd see repentance as the bread and butter of the Christian life, so to speak.

[3 : 47] Repentance is the beginning, the middle, and the end. Something we never grow out of. Something we never get past. Repentance is not some self-help or improvement program to make us a better version of ourselves.

Nor is it a self-hatred and loathing program. Repentance is simply about turning from the sin which devastates and destroys us and trusting in the mercy of God which gives us life and renews us.

And repentance is the Christian's continual posture in this life. Why? Because the gospel is not just for one moment, but it's for every day in every moment.

And brothers and sisters, this is not just pie in the sky, pious speak here. This is real life on the ground stuff. Because repentance affects our conversations, the conversations we have with our spouses and our family members in the kitchen.

It calls us to turn from the harsh, impatient words that are so often exchanged and to trust in God's mercy to give us gentle and gracious words.

[4 : 55] Repentance affects the business practices that we have in the office because it calls us to turn from the cunning and greedy plans that we... It calls us to turn from trying to squeeze as much as we can out of people and instead to trust God's mercy for honest and generous business plans.

And repentance affects the interactions that we have with random people on the street. It turns us from a place of cynicism and unconcern towards those that we don't know and rather helps us to trust in God's mercy to have a tender and compassionate heart towards those who are in need.

You see, this is very, very practical stuff this morning. And that's why when we turn to Jonah 3, we get taken straight into the heart of the Christian life.

And right away when we come to Jonah 3, you're going to be surprised by a couple things. The first thing is that we don't learn about the nature of repentance from God's people. We actually learn about repentance from a pagan, wicked city.

And the second thing is, repentance doesn't actually begin with human beings in this passage. It begins and it ends with God. You can see this in the very structure of Jonah 3.

[6 : 18] Verses 5 to 9 are Nineveh repenting. But before that, in verses 1 to 4, it's all about God's compassion. And then verse 10 afterwards is all about God's mercy.

And what this tells us from the very beginning is that repentance as the Christian way of life is generated not by our own superpowers, but by coming to know the very heart of God.

So let's dive in, friends. Verses 1 to 4. God's compassion and love. When I was a kid, my parents taught me two songs when I was about three years old that tried to get the gospel in me really early.

The first song was, Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. You guys know that one.

Jesus loves me this I know. I could figure that out.

The other one is Deep and Wide. You guys know that song? I don't remember any of the words except for Deep and Wide. So as a little kid, I can combine these two songs, what I remembered of them, and I'd get up on my soapbox, even at three years old, and I'd talk about, Jesus loves me this I know, Deep and Wide.

[7 : 39] But that's exactly what our passage is about. It's about the love and the compassion of God, which is not only deep, but it's really wide in our passage. And we see the depth of it in verses one to two and how God treats Jonah.

Notice how verses one and two in chapter three mirror verses one and two in chapter one. As if to say, this is a sort of new beginning for Jonah. Verse one, Here, God is initiating Mission Impossible 2.

I say Mission Impossible because the first time God did this, it seemed like a massive failure.

Wasn't it? In chapters one and two, Jonah hears the word of God, go tell Nineveh that they're doomed for destruction so that they can turn to me.

And Jonah says, I want nothing to do with your mission, God. And he literally flees the opposite direction and does everything he can to get away from God.

God has to go after him. He's got to send a storm after him. He's got to kick him off a ship in the water so that he can get swallowed by a big fish and learn that God is rescuing him and God is going to bring him to a place where he can finally hear his words and participate in God's purposes.

[9 : 11] Jonah is quite possibly the world's worst missionary of all time. Yet God saves him.

Chapter two.

God restores him. And now at the beginning of chapter three, God wants to use him again to reach people. It's the deep compassion of God that is so patient and persistent with his unruly servants.

And personally, friends, I find this very encouraging. Just a few weeks ago, I was on the bus reading the book of Ephesians. Glorious stuff. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He's blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. I'm meditating on that verse. Somebody sits next to me and goes, what are you reading about? I'm reading the Bible.

I don't really want to talk about it. I blew that. I blew that. But God gives us second chances here. Here. It's a new beginning for Jonah.

[10:19] He's patient with us in our failure. And he goes after us even when we reject him. And here you see him grabbing a hold of Jonah and finally bringing him once again to a place where Jonah can hear God's word to him and finally participate in God's plan to reach the nations.

It's a wonderful, wonderful gift. But God's compassion is not only deep, it is really wide. Because it doesn't just go to Jonah or God's people, it goes to the most wicked city of that day.

Verses 3 and 4. So Jonah called out against... That's the wrong thing. Verse 3. So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord.

Now, Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. Mark that. Three days' journey in breadth. And Jonah began to go into the city, go in a day's journey, and he cried out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

Now, at first glance, that doesn't look very compassionate. You think, whoa, that's doom and gloom stuff. But it is.

[11:40] God is sending Jonah to warn people that they are on the path of destruction and they need to turn if they want life. But notice how Jonah's mission is interrupted randomly in the middle of verse 3 with the description of the city he sent to.

Verse 3. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city. Three days' journey in breadth. An exceedingly great city. Isn't that an interesting way to describe a city that was really wicked?

In the Hebrew, your Bible might have a footnote showing you this, but in the Hebrew, the words, to God, literally show up. Meaning, you could translate this, a city great to God.

And the Hebrew word for great could have one of two meanings. It can have the meaning of size or significance. Now we see the meaning of size throughout the book of Jonah.

Here, because it talks about the city as being a three days journey. At the end of chapter 4, God says, I love this city and have compassion on them. It is 120,000 people.

[12:46] As if God has a heart for that size of a city. But here, I think it actually has the meaning of significance and importance, actually. So what ends up happening is you could literally translate this phrase as saying, a significant city to God.

Or Nineveh is a city important to God. And why is that detail important? Because God wants to reveal to us his heart for the city. This is not just any city, like I've said.

It's the worst of cities. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. God's greatest, the greatest enemy of God's people who destroyed them.

The kingdom. And it was a city that was notorious for being full of violence and social injustice and oppression and moral perversion. And we are being told that God has a heart for this city.

I think this is very important for us in the 21st century for a couple of reasons. not only because we live in a city, City of Vancouver, but also because we live in a world where cities are increasingly important.

[13:58] A couple months ago, I was reading a paper on world urbanization by the World Population Bureau. There's some good time, good bedtime reading right there, guys. And I actually discovered that in 1800, this blew my mind, only 3% of the world's population lived in urban centers.

By 1900, 14% of the world's population. By 1950, 30% of the world's population. By 2008, 50% of the world's population lived in urban centers.

And it is projected, according to this study, that by 2050, over 70% of the world's population will be in a major urban center. And currently, there are over 400 cities with over 1 million people.

And in the midst of such rapid global urbanization, we have to ask ourselves, what is God's posture and heart towards this city? Because it really matters. And the answer our passage gives us is compassion.

Deep compassion. That when God looks at Vancouver and Toronto, when God looks at Hong Kong and Beijing, when God looks at Cairo or Moscow or Los Angeles, yes, he feels deep anger at the immorality and injustice he sees.

[15:25] Yes, he feels wrath over the pride and the selfishness. And yes, he feels sorrow over the devastation and the brokenness. But most deeply and most fundamentally, God feels deep compassion when he looks into the heart of the world's cities.

And deep compassion for the lowest of the low and the highest of the high and everything in between. Because he cares. God's compassion interestingly, in Jonah 3, God's compassion is

expressed in a very interesting way.

It's words of warning, intense warning. Verse 4, yet 40 days in Nineveh shall be overthrown. Once again, that doesn't sound like compassion, but it is.

And it's a short, punchy sermon at that. In Hebrew, it's about five words. And maybe some of you are wishing that St. John's preachers would take some notes on that. But notice how this is so different from all the rest of the prophetic books that we have in the Bible.

All the other prophetic books go on for chapters and chapters describing what the prophets say and here we get five words. But what I think this is meant to describe, now Jonah said more than five words, I think.

[16 : 49] I don't think he just said five words and peaced out. I think he did a little more preaching than that. But what I think this is meant to teach us by how concise it is is the power of God's word when it comes.

It's efficacy and it's potency. That it only takes five words from the living God to initiate the transformation of an entire city. And it can happen where and when we least expect it.

There's a famous 18th century preacher named Charles Spurgeon. Maybe some of you have heard him and maybe some of you even enjoy reading his stuff. And in 1857, he was preparing to preach before a massive crowd.

Over 23,000 people showed up to hear him and preach that day. And so as you can imagine, he went a couple days early to prepare because there was no amplification in that day or microphones. So he wanted to see the space where these people would be and where he should put his preaching podium. And he also wanted to test the acoustics of the place. See how far his voice could project.

[17 : 56] Instead of using testing one, two, three, he decided to use John chapter one verse 29. And he shouted to one direction, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

It's got to be loud enough for 23,000 people. So he turns to the other side of the auditorium and says, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And Spurgeon later told the story that the most amazing thing happened. Just as he was saying that one sentence, in the dark in the back there was a worker who knew nothing of what was happening and when he heard these words they struck his heart like a lightning bolt from heaven and he was convicted of his sin.

He was working. He was so smitten with conviction that he put down his tools, he went home and he struggled with his guilt and conviction until finally he came to believe that God had showed him mercy in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Stopped him straight in the midst of daily task and the Lord grabbed a hold of his heart. There is power in the word of God and it's a power that has enough compassion to reach out to one man and bring him home and it's power that has enough compassion to reach out to an entire city and to cause them to turn and repent when God warns.

[19 : 27] And so we see that Nineveh repents in verses 5 to 9 and their repentance is immediate, comprehensive and wholehearted.

It's immediate. Jonah only has to walk one day into the city. He doesn't even get into the center of the city and he says his one line sermon and word just spreads and people start turning.

It's immediate. It's also comprehensive. Notice the chain reaction that comes and all the people it includes. Verse 5. The people of Nineveh believed God.

They trusted God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. So it's the common people. And then in verse 6 it reaches the courts, the royal courts.

The word reached the king of Nineveh. He arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. Everybody's responding here from the highest to the lowest.

[20 : 35] And notice even how in verses 7 and 8 the animals get involved. The animals somehow join in this repentance. Now there's a picture we haven't seen before.

I think in that world animals represented business. They represented economy. They represented personal finances. So I think this is trying to tell us that the repentance is so comprehensive that when God's word breaks into people's lives it not only grabs hold of people but it grabs hold of every aspect of their lives and their action.

Every arena of life. Even their jobs and their livelihood and their economy. The word of God comes and lays hold of that area too. Nothing is left untouched.

And notice how it is a wholehearted repentance. See what the king does in verse 6. He removes all the signs of royal authority.

Notice how it says he rose up from his throne and he sat in ashes. He removed his royal robe and he covered himself in sackcloth. And sackcloth is mentioned three times in this passage because it is an image of mourning over your sins.

[21 : 54] An image of putting yourself in humility before the Lord and casting yourself on his lavish mercy and grace. But notice how this repentance isn't just some general Lord I'm sorry.

They get very specific about the reasons why they need to repent. verse 8. King says let everyone turn from his evil way which refers to personal moral sins and from the violence that is in his hands. That refers to the social injustice that often breaks apart cities when sinful people rub elbows together for long periods of time. And the king doesn't say we can fix this situation by ourselves guys.

He says we have to cast ourselves on God. Look at verse 9. He is crystal clear about dependence on God. Who knows God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

The king doesn't presume upon God's mercy. He knows they don't deserve it. He simply says in your hands God is our welfare and our future.

[23 : 16] And friends this is a miraculous and dramatic picture of what happens when people hear and respond to the word of God. I mean I can't think of a picture in all the Bible that is a picture of more dramatic and heartfelt repentance than this and it is coming from the most unlikely place this wicked pagan enemy city.

And friends I think one of the things this is trying to teach us is that when God's word breaks into our lives and we really hear it it is disruptive.

It arrests us. It stops us in our tracks and says life cannot go on the same anymore because you've encountered the living God. You have to turn you have to repent and you have to receive new life. sometimes I think we need to be reminded especially for those of us that love reading the Bible every Sunday and throughout the week and studying it that encountering God's voice is a life-altering event.

It is not safe, it is not timid, and it is not mild. Yes, God's word comes to comfort and console us, don't get me wrong. It comes to heal and restore us.

[24 : 36] It comes to touch and teach and train us, but it also comes to confront and judge and reorient us, and that's what we see here. And what we discover is that our well-being as human beings and as Christians in large part depends on whether we are willing to let the word of God disrupt us and reorient us and renew us, and whether we're willing to see that behind these words of God is a God of great compassion, deep and wide love.

The people of Nineveh caught at least a glimpse of it, and so they repent. And then God responds to their repentance in the most amazing way in verse 10.

He delights to show them mercy. In his mercy, he turns from judgment. Verse 10. When God saw what they did, meaning how they responded to his warning, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

God does not give Nineveh or us what we deserve. He holds back. He turns. He relents. And friends, this is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From this side of the cross, you know it well. You know that God didn't just turn from their sin and turn a blind eye to it and say, it's okay, don't worry about it. We can be friends. No, God absorbed into himself what the Ninevites deserved on the cross so that he could turn from them having to experience the devastation of it.

[26 : 25] It's on the cross that God, the rivers of God's mercy flows into the world. I want to conclude by quoting another prophet with whom we should be fairly familiar at this point in time.

The prophet Ezekiel. Chapter 18, he says this. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord?

And not rather that he should turn, run from his way and live? Therefore, I will judge you, O house of Israel. Every one of you according to your ways, declares the Lord.

Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest your iniquity be your ruin. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God. So turn and live. Friends, what we discover in Jonah 3 is that God's heartbeat for his people is God's heartbeat for the entire world.

[27 : 35] He wants people to turn and he wants people to experience his compassion and mercy. And the more that we soak in this as the people of God, the more that we soak in the abundance of God's mercy and let it seep its way into every nook and cranny of our souls and our minds and our relationships and our lives, the more God gives us a renewed view of the world in which we live.

And the more that we see the people on the streets and the more that we look at the city of Vancouver, we see it through God's eyes of compassion for those people. May this be so for us today.

May this be so for us this week. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.