Grace Lutheran Church

Pastor David's Message Outline

God's Outrageous Mercy

SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

### 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Jonah 3:10-4:11

3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.4:1 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3 And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6 The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 10 Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

**Prayer for Illumination:**

As we sing our praise to you, O Lord, we remember the multitude of blessings you have given us. We are mindful of the ways in which you have lifted us when we have fallen low. Be with us this Sunday as we gather to hear your word for our lives. AMEN.

Thank you for joining us today; I start today's message with a question: Have you ever encountered a real "Scrooge"? I am speaking about a negative, critical, grumbling, demanding, selfish, angry person who cannot stand to see other people happy and enjoying life.

Someone Like Ebenezer Scrooge, in Charles Dicken's story about a man who was well off-financially, who is a loner, who dislikes people and Christmas?  However, Ebenezer Scrooge has a conversion experience and becomes a nice older man.

Not everyone is fortunate as Ebenezer to turn their life around. However, God wants every human being to change and to live their lives with joy, love, kindness as well as contentment. I believe that before the beautiful Christmas story of Ebenezer Scrooge, there have been numerous Scrooges living on the planet earth.

Today's first lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, I would label our dear brother Jonah a "Scrooge."

Yes, I realize he was a prophet of God, but he seems to me to be the ultimate Scrooge.

Why would I take the liberty to say this?

When God told him to communicate the Good News to Nineveh, he instead hopped in a boat and headed in the opposite direction to Tarshish, which is about as far away from Nineveh as one can get. Jonah decided to disobey God. Poor brother Jonah, he cannot help himself.   
  
A storm came up, and eventually, Jonah acknowledges that he was the cause of the raging storm going against them. He urged the ship's crew to throw him overboard into the raging sea.

Finally, they threw him into the sea, where a great fish immediately swallowed Jonah. The prophet cried out to God, and the fish vomited him on dry land.

A Jewish Rabbi once shared with me a humorous statement that went like this "perhaps the acids in the big fishes' belly turned Jonah's skin so white that he looked like a ghost when the big fish vomited him out from its belly. God finally got old Scrooge's attention, and the miracle of miracles takes place, to be swallowed by a big fish, afterword’s to stay in the belly of the big fish and survive for three days and three nights.

**A Second Time Around**  
As the scene opens, our good friend Jonah is sitting on a beach; probably all shaken by his recent big fish encounter. Suddenly the same word from God came to him a second time saying, "Get up; go to Nineveh, that great city; and preach to it the message I tell you."   
  
Jonah carried out his assignment with very little enthusiasm. Why was he such a reluctant ambassador of God or a messenger of God? Perhaps Jonah was called to preach to a nation other than Israel, which went against his "religion." Good Jewish prophets of God did not preach to other countries. Many teachers of the Hebrew Scriptures teach us that most likely, there was to be a strict separation from other nations. Moreover, Jonah believed that other countries were out to eradicate Israel. ***Why be kind and save the enemy.***   
  
Not only was he to preach to a people outside of Israel, but the city to which he was being sent was Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a nation which, in its day, had set a standard of dread and terror. For Jonah, preaching to Nineveh would be like going to a country that hates us here.

For Jonah, the thought of preaching in Nineveh was out of the question. There was no way Jonah was going to preach to individuals who were [gangster](https://www.bing.com/search?q=define+thug&FORM=DCTRQY)s and assassins.

Between the years 890 -640 BCE, the Assyrians fought 108 major and minor wars against neighboring states and had won each one of them. They had a reputation for bloodshed.

You can bet Jonah did not sing one of our favorite congregational hymns: I, The Lord of Sea and Sky, I Have **Heard My People Cry.** All Who Dwell in Dark And Sin, My Hand Will Save. I Who Made the Stars Of Night, I Will Make Their Darkness Bright. Who Will Bear My Light to Them? Whom Shall I Send? Here I Am Lord, Is It I, Lord? I Have Heard You Calling in The Night. I Will Go Lord If You Lead Me. I Will Hold Your People in My Heart.

As Jonah sat on the beach,  crying and full of anger against God called him a second time, and he responded as a prophet is expected to respond. So, Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, that great city.  
  
Jonah went to the city of Nineveh with a message of law and Gospel, bad news, which can lead to God's outrageous mercy and forgiveness.  A pastor friend of mine says it like this: "Bad News Which Became Good News."  
  
Jonah walked toward the city of Nineveh. He was not a happy prophet; he was an angry and upset cranky prophet of old. He did not even do what he was told. Jonah stopped short of going across the city of Nineveh.

His sermon was not great; in the Hebrew, it consisted of only eight words: **"Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."**

A sermon that did not take much sermon preparation  
Surprisingly, Jonah's sermon was successful, and the response of the people was amazing. They accepted the message, believed it, trusted God, called for a fast, and dressed in the clothes of mourning.

Not only did the people of Nineveh repent, but the king also repented and joined his subjects by putting on mourning clothes and sitting in ashes. The king then called for a fast and admonished all his subjects to turn from their evil and wickedness.  
  
How did God react to all of this? God saw the repentance of Nineveh's citizens, and he called off the intended destruction. The prophet's "doomsday sermon" was heard, and the people repented.

God decided not to destroy them, and that was "Good News." Yes, the "Bad News" Jonah preached became the "Good News" of God for Nineveh. In the story of Jonah, there is something essential for us to consider to hear this morning: **God Is A God of Outrageous Mercy!**   
  
While Jonah acted like a "Scrooge," God revealed that He is a God who cares. Jonah certainly did not care for the city of Nineveh. But God is a God of love who wants to save humanity from itself.

One might go so far as to say that "God so loved Nineveh that he sent an angry, grumpy prophet named Jonah to preach to them, to show his mercy and care.   
  
I wonder who is our Nineveh in our lives that we do not care for? However, God cared for them as well as God cares for us.

What I find so interesting in our story today is that Jonah received mercy from God, he could have died in the stomach of the big fish, yet he cannot extend God's mercy and compassion for others who are different from him.

***What about us? Who is God putting in our sights to extend mercy?***

Perhaps God is calling us today to examine self-righteous attitudes, that we think we are better than other people who are different from us.

At times we have a churchy attitude that we are the insiders, and others are the outsiders. We act as if we should be first, and others should be last. Our blessed Lord taught us in today's Gospel that the first will be last, and the last will be first.  Sisters and brothers, God's mercy is given for both outsiders and insiders!

Could it be that today's story from the Hebrew Scriptures calls us to be nice, to be kind, to be nonjudgmental against people who dislike us or different from us? But equally important for us to stop being angry because God is blessing other people who are not like us. Why, because God cares and wants to extend outrageous mercy.

The story of Jonah reminds us that we exist for the sake of the people of our world. Who cares? We should, we were once lost and now found; we were once in the belly of a big fish, and God saved us from death.

The story in the book of Jonah ends with the following question: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" *Amazingly, Jonah's response is not given. Humm, I hope he stopped being unkind, angry, cranky, and upset with God and the world.*

### **Let us Take a Moment for Personal Reflection:**

### **Response to the Message:**

Let us pray.  
Essence of all, we sometimes forget that your loving and merciful justice never changes. In relationship with humanity, your love and justice are not about punishment or vindictiveness. Help us to reveal your image within ourselves that we can forgive the unforgivable, love the unlovable, and strive for your just kingdom on earth in our every moment in our every decision. Amen.