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Turning Towards God
Jonah 3
November 10th, 2013, Jeff Germo

Norman Geisler, in his book, *The Collapse of Modern Atheism*, tells the true story about a philosophy student who wrote a research paper arguing that there are no objective, universal moral principles. The paper was written very well. The research was superior, the scholarship was second to none, and it was well documented. It was easily an "A" paper. The professor, however, took one look at it, pulled out his red felt pen and wrote "F", and then added the comment, "I do not like blue covers."

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When the student got his paper back he stormed into the professor's office, "This is not fair! This is not just! I shouldn't be graded on the colour of my cover, but on the content of my paper!" The professor asked if the student was referring to the paper in which he argued that there are no objective moral principles such as fairness and justice. The student replied, "Yes, yes, that's the one!" The professor responded, "Well... I do not like blue covers. The grade will remain an 'F'." Suddenly the student realized that he really did believe in objective moral principles like fairness and justice, and he was expecting them to be applied to his situation right then and there.¹

There are people who say that they don't believe in moral absolutes, but they live like they do. For instance, if they get cut off in traffic they all of a sudden want justice. When we hear about some of the things in the news like the disgraced Canadian senators in the senate expense scandal we cry out, "Justice needs to be met." We hear about things every day in the news that cause us to cry out for justice. "It's not fair" is a natural cry from every human being when they feel like their rights have been abused. We all want justice.

Our post-modern world is quite fickle when it comes to talking about justice. We want to be our own judge. **Ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden, in Genesis 3, humankind has been trying to usurp God's role as ruler and put himself on the throne instead.**

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We want to decide what is right and what is wrong for ourselves without anybody else judging us. And so this chapter in Jonah is particularly disturbing for some people because it deals with some politically incorrect topics that we don't like to talk about, such as sin, the judgment and wrath of God, and the need for repentance. Try striking up a friendly conversation about these things with a stranger in a coffee shop and let me know how it goes.

If you tried to talk about these things to the average person on the street in Canada they will see them as repugnant. And even as Christians, sometimes we get so complacent and comfortable with our lives that we don't like to call our sin "sin", or at the very least, we think that God won't judge us because He is a loving God of grace. So, we live with our sin and pretend that God doesn't care that we are living with what we euphemize as a vice. Everyone has them, so it's not a big deal. Everyone is living this way. Or, we compare ourselves with someone like Hitler and smugly feel somehow justified because we are not as bad as him. "It's just gossip. It's not like I killed someone."

If you are sitting here this morning with that sort of mindset you will have a particularly difficult time listening to this sermon from God's Word. And so my prayer is that each of us would have hearts that are ready to hear what God has to say, and that we would be moved to take action.

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This is number three in our sermon series on the prophet Jonah. To get us up to speed let's summarize chapter one and two.

Chapter one begins with God issuing a call to Jonah to go and preach against the wickedness of Nineveh in hopes that they would repent and turn **from** their violent ways and **towards** God. Jonah didn't like this idea so he boarded a ship and high tailed it in the exact opposite direction.

Jonah soon found out that escaping God was not an easy venture. And along the way God intervened with a great storm that caused the sailors of the ship to fear for their lives. The sailors found out that it was the sin of Jonah that was

¹ Norman Geisler, *The Collapse of Modern Atheism: 11 in Intellectuals Speak Out About God*, edited by Roy Abraham Varghese, (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1984) p.147

responsible for the storm. They asked Jonah what they should do and he told them that their only hope for survival was to throw him overboard into the sea. They reluctantly did that and God intervenes again. The storm calms down for the sailors. God saved them, and they became worshippers of Yahweh, the God of the Bible -- Jonah's God. And then God sends a fish to swallow Jonah alive where he camps out for three days and three nights alone with his thoughts. God gave him a forced quiet time where he could reflect on his actions over the last few days of running. And it was there that Jonah begins a very active and passionate prayer life. During his introspective prayer he realizes how fortunate he is to have such a God of grace who never gives up on His people. He makes a vow that he will be obedient this time and fulfill the call of God.

Chapter two ends like this:

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¹⁰ Then the LORD ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach.

It would be easy to quickly read this without recognizing what is happening. God spoke to the fish and told it what to do and it obeyed. That's pretty phenomenal. God is sovereign not just over people, but over all creation. First He calls a storm to intervene in the boat ride. Then He summons a big fish to swallow Jonah and makes sure that he somehow stays alive. And then after Jonah has had enough time of reflection so that he is ready to obey, God speaks to the fish and the fish, on command, pukes Jonah up on the shore.

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God is sovereign over people, over nations, and over all of nature. He is the supreme ruler of the universe that He created. That is pretty amazing, and it is actually one of the main themes of the book of Jonah. God is in charge. We try to take His job and times, but it's always a vain attempt. God will bow down to no one. He cannot be manipulated.

So, the fish obeys God and hurls Jonah onto dry land. The NLT is quite polite in how it describes this. It says that the fish spit Jonah up, but it was actually not that sterile. The fish literally puked Jonah up, and probably along with the other contents of his stomach. I know this is not a pretty image, but it's likely how it happened, and as unpleasant as it might be to imagine this it's important to get a picture of the kind of shape Jonah was likely in when he began his journey to Nineveh to obey the call of God on his life.

There is a rather dubious account of a whaler in 1891 that was said to have been swallowed by a sperm whale and was in the whale's stomach for two days until he was rescued when another whaling ship caught the whale and cut him open to find James Bartley unconscious but still alive. It was said that his skin was bleached white like parchment from the stomach acids of the fish. Now, this is likely just a fish story, but if someone could survive something like that, it would be likely that when they were rescued, or vomited out on dry land that their complexion would not be exactly pristine.

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So, try to imagine what Jonah might have looked like before he began his journey to Nineveh. In the belly of a fish for three days. Unless, God put some sort of force field around him to totally protect him from the effects of the stomach acids and the rotting fish and seaweed he likely looked like a wreck, bleached white, and probably smelled like garbage rotting in the hot sun. And then he's hurled violently onto a beach with whatever else the fish had for dinner. So, there he was on the beach laying in a puddle of puke drying out in the sun, and God speaks to him.

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Jonah 3:1-10 (NLT)

¹Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ²"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

We have sort of déjà vu here. This is how chapter one started.

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Jonah 1:1, 2 (NLT)

¹The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: ²"Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."

Jonah had previously disobeyed God in a big way. And now, the God of second chances, without doing a guilt trip, or reminding Jonah of how he had so terribly failed Him, tells him to go and give Nineveh a message from Him.

This reminds me of what Jesus did with Peter after Peter had denied Jesus three times. Three times he denied that he even knew Jesus because he was afraid. And then after Jesus was crucified and risen from the dead Jesus continued to love him, and extended trust to him. He told him to take care of the other disciples. How many of us would be able to do that to someone who turned their backs on us? Once someone lets us down it's pretty tough for us to trust them again isn't it? We don't want to take the risk that they'll blow it again.

God's not like that though. You may think that you have failed God miserably and that God could never use you again. But, the truth is that you, like Jonah are probably **more useful to God after a successful failure than before.**

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Jonah was ready, after his three days of confinement in the belly of the fish, alone with his thoughts to consider his actions, and stop running. God used that time to prepared him so he was ready to listen and obey.

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³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.

So, Jonah hears the word of the LORD, gets up, dusts himself off and heads to Nineveh, which was over a 1000km trip. He was on foot. If he walked for ten hours a day it would have taken him two to three weeks to get there. Two or three hard weeks of walking in the hot sun in his stinky clothes that likely had fish vomit crusted onto it. You can probably imagine what he would have looked, felt, and smelled like by the time he arrived in Nineveh.

Now, it says that Nineveh was an important city that required a three day visit. The Ninevites knew their importance. They were a thriving metropolis. It was, perhaps, the most important city in Assyria. It was a place where culture, art, and philosophical thought thrived. It was **the** place to be. The king of Nineveh would have been a sought after dignitary. He was likely a very proud man who instilled a sense of confidence in his subjects that they had worth because they were citizens of such a great city with such a great man as their king. He was probably a man who was not used to bowing down to anyone.

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⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

Jonah's message was a simple turn or burn, no frills message. **"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."**

Now, I want you to imagine what this must have looked like. Jonah had just finished walking over 1000km. He likely did not look his best. He wasn't dressed to go to a party. His clothes were probably dusty, dirty and crusted over with fish puke. His skin may have been bleached white from the gastric juices from the fish in whose belly he had made his home a couple weeks prior to this. He probably looks like a zombie like creature - one of the walking dead.

So, he's walking around the streets of this sophisticated, important city yelling out, **"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."** Who would listen to a kook that looked like that with such a critical judgmental message?

What would you do if you saw someone like that today? Over thirty years ago I was with a friend in New York City, walking on 52nd Street and there was a street evangelist pulling a little cart with a loud speaker on it and he basically had the same message Jonah had. **Turn or burn.** He was yelling out in a very loud voice demanding that people repent of their sins because the wrath of God was going to judge them soon. Nobody paid any attention. They walked on by. Everyone except the friend I was with. He went to him and told him that he was giving God a bad name.

Why would anyone believe a message like that? We don't like to hear messages like that? We don't like others telling us that our lifestyle doesn't honour God, and that we will be judged. Who would listen to that? And yet, the Ninevites listened to Jonah.

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⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Now, I would imagine what happened was, as Jonah was proclaiming God's message in the streets, people saw the sorry shape he was in and they asked, "What happened to you?" The Bible doesn't tell us that, but you can pretty much be sure that it would have happened. He probably looked like a walking, rotting corpse.

And maybe Jonah responded by saying something like this, "Well, God spoke to me a few weeks back and told me to come to Nineveh and preach against it, but I didn't want to so I thought I would try to outrun Him. I went in the opposite direction and caught a ship that was going to Tarshish. But then God sent a great storm that made the pagan sailors call out to him for mercy, and they became worshippers of Yahweh, and I told them that if they wanted to be saved they would have to throw me overboard into the sea, and so they did. Then God caused the sea to calm down. And He sent a big fish to swallow me. God protected me in the fish for three days, which is why I smell and look like this, and then when I was ready to listen and obey God He told the fish to vomit me on dry land. And so here I am. Are you going to listen or not? **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.**"

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⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

Can you imagine going to Prime Minister Harper and telling him that he needs to repent? Or, probably a more apt scenario would be going to President Obama and telling him that he and all of America needs to repent or God will judge them. How do you think he would respond? "Who does this guy think he is talking to me that way? Doesn't he know who I am?"

This is quite phenomenal that a King would listen to a foreign, dirty, stinky guy with a doomsday message. This was obviously a work of God. He saw what was happening in the city. There was an awakening among them. A wave of God's Spirit swept through the city and convicted the whole population that their sin has been seen by God and He is no longer going to tolerate it. And the king, very obviously, agreed with God. And look what he does.

"He rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust."

This is so important. Don't miss the significance of the king's action. He got off his throne. He realized that God was right. His life and the life of the whole city was grieving God. He got off his throne. He recognized that if there was going to be forgiveness and mercy from God he would have to relinquish control of his throne and his whole life.

He took off his royal robes and covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust with the common man in the street. Can you imagine how much humility that would take to do that as a king? He agreed with God about his depraved spiritual condition. It wasn't merely an intellectual ascent to an idea or truth. He believed God and it moved him to action.

The whole city turned to God. It was an unprecedented mass repentance that affected all sectors of society. They believed God and were moved to action. They grieved over their sin, so much so that they declared a fast, and changed their ways.

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Let me ask you a question. Do the things that offend God offend you? **Do you grieve over the things that God grieves over?** I'm not talking about in other people. It's easy to look at others and say, "Oh, The Lord must be grieving over the way those people behave." That's easy. Anybody can do that. The Pharisees did that self-righteous act all the time. What's difficult is allowing the Holy Spirit to stick his probe in our own hearts.

How do you treat other people? What kinds of attitudes do you have about yourself, or towards others? Does it grieve your heart when you judge others, or have a critical spirit, or whine and complain about things that are not really that important? Does it grieve your heart that you turn the other way when God asks you to help someone who needs help? Does it grieve your heart when you are living a kind of lifestyle that you know dishonours God?

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We say that we believe God, but do we really believe if our thoughts and actions don't prove it? The Bible says that if our belief is not followed through with action it is not true belief. **True belief always leads to action** – always. Sometimes we know what's wrong and yet we do it anyway. Or, we know what's right and we don't do it. The problem is that we think it doesn't matter. We think that God won't judge us. We think that our sin doesn't grieve God. But, it does. It grieves Him deeply. And that knowledge should drive us to our knees and beg for forgiveness and mercy.

You see, the problem with us when we don't repent is that we think we have the right to decide what's right for us. We think truth is relative. We want to be God, and so we aren't grieved by our sin because we think that God doesn't really care. But He does. And He is calling each of us to rise up, get off our thrones, and let Christ rule our hearts.

All of Nineveh believed God and they mourned their sin and turned towards Him. Had they not done so they would have lost everything. But because they did, they could experience God in a very real way.

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¹⁰When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.

God will judge sin. If God did not judge sin he would cease to be holy. He has to deal with sin because he cannot contravene his perfect nature, but he would rather that we turn to him so that he can extend His grace, mercy and compassion towards us. You may think that you are too far gone, that you have sinned too much, that God could never forgive you. You may think that it's too late for you. It's not. It is never too late to turn to God. There is nobody here this morning who is too far gone for God to forgive. Everyone here can have a brand new start.

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But, in order to have that new start **you will need to get up off your throne, acknowledge that God is right about your sin, and give Him His rightful place on the throne of your heart.** If you do that, the Bible says He will never turn anyone away who humbly surrenders himself to God. And please do not look at your neighbour and think this is about them. It's about you and me.

Turn in your Bibles to the New Testament, to **Matthew 12:38. (NLT)**

The setting here is a conflict that Jesus had with some religious leaders. They were offended by the message of Jesus and they were basically saying, "Who gives you the right to say and do these things?" They felt judged by His words, and they wanted to remain their own judges. They wanted to decide what was right for themselves. They were basically saying, "Who do you think you are?"

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³⁸ One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority." ³⁹ But Jesus replied, "Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign; but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

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⁴¹ "The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here—but you refuse to repent.

Jonah, went to the people of Nineveh with a simple message from God. He was an unlikely messenger. He looked and smelled like rotting fish. But, they believed God and turned away from their sin and towards God. If they had refused to believe and continued on with their lives as usual they would have lost everything.

And now the Bible says that someone greater than Jonah is here, and that One, of course is Jesus. The question for each of us this morning is, **will we listen to the call of Jesus?** Will we give Him permission to put His probe into our hearts and show us what we already know is sin? And will we get up off our throne and give Him His rightful place? The Bible calls each one of us here to repentance. Repentance means to turn from your own way to the way of Jesus, and there is nobody here this morning that does not need to repent, including me.

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Usually, our problem is not that we don't know what our sin is. Our problem is that we don't want to turn from it because we either enjoy it too much, or we feel justified in it. Let's pray together that we would each have the courage to agree with God that we have a problem and cooperate with the Spirit of Jesus to do something about it.

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The good news is that in Christ Jesus we have the power to deal with it.



Jonah: The Reluctant Evangelist
Turning Towards God
Week of November 10th, 2013
Jonah 3

Objective: To get to that place of readiness where our hearts are open to hear and obey whatever God asks of us.

Worship (5-10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. Have someone read Psalm 40 meditatively to the group.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5-10 minutes)

Icebreaker: When was the time you felt least presentable in public?
OR: Describe a time when you got a second chance at something.

Word (30 - 40 minutes)

- 1) What stood out for you from the sermon on Sunday?
- 2) a) Read Jonah 3.
b) Review together the events that led up to Jonah going to Nineveh.
c) What condition do you think Jonah was in by this time?
- 3) This chapter is all about responses. Remember that God is the main character.
How do each of the other characters respond to God?
And then what is God's response to each of them?
- 4) Describe the King of Nineveh and his city.
- 5) Look at verse 6. Pull out everything you can about the King's response to Jonah's message.
What was his attitude? Was he proud? humble? teachable? resistant?
What evidence is there that he took Jonah seriously?
What can we learn from his response to Jonah's message and to God?
- 6) Read Acts 20:21.
How are repentance and faith related?
- 7) Read Matthew 12:38-41.
Discuss the response of the Ninevites compared to that of the religious people of Jesus' day.

Work (30 - 40 minutes)

- 1) God pursued Jonah and gave him a second chance to preach to Nineveh. Likewise, after Peter denied Jesus, Jesus sought him out, helped him to face the truth, and gave him a job to do. (See John 21:15-19.) How has God given you second chances?
- 2) Discuss these quotes from the sermon:
"True belief always leads to action."
"Do you grieve over what God grieves over?"
"What does it mean about us if we don't repent of our sin?"
- 3) How did the Spirit of Jesus speak to you? If you feel safe doing so, share what God has been saying to you.