



SUNDAY MORNING SERMON

January 2nd, 2022

The Pathetic Sermon

There are many sermons recorded in the bible. Some by prophets, some by disciples, and some by Jesus himself. There is one however which could be called the most pathetic sermon of them all. This sermon belongs to Jonah. When he arrived in Nineveh, after a brief hiatus with a large fish, Jonah proclaims the shortest and indeed most unimpressive sermon. Rather than preaching about God's mercy and grace, which he had just received, he tells them all hope is lost. So, what can we learn from this sermon? Jonah gave up on his mission field. Do we likewise neglect those God would have us lead to him? Today's sermon will remind us of what Jonah forgot: God will use us to accomplish his purposes in offering salvation. Let's commit this year, 2022, to faithfully following him as we seek to save the lost in Jesus' name.

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New Year's Sermon

“And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”” (Jonah 3:4 ESV)

“The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.” (Matthew 12:41 ESV)

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Jonah 3:1-5

Dr. Matthew Stanton

Introduction:

Good morning Cornerstone and happy new year! It's great to be with you on this the first Sunday of 2022. The first sermon I ever preached here was January 3rd of 2021. I think there may be a bit of a tradition building here, perhaps Pastor Paul likes to stay up late on New Year's Eve! You'll notice that the title for this sermon is *The Pathetic Sermon*. I'll address the elephant in the room and say that it's probably not the best title for a sermon if you're the one preaching it. But what this title is referring to is a sermon recorded in the Old Testament given by a prophet.

There are many sermons recorded in the bible, some given by prophets, some by apostles, and even by Jesus himself. This one though stands out, and you'll have already heard it if you've been through Sunday school and heard the story about that guy in a whale. Yes, it's Jonah. Jonah preached what I am calling the most pathetic sermon in the whole of the bible. It's found in Jonah chapter 3, so please turn there with me now.

My goal for us in today's sermon is to remind us of what Jonah forgot: that God will use his people to accomplish his purpose in offering salvation. Let's commit this year, 2022, to faithfully

following him as we seek to save the lost in Jesus' name. Jonah's story will help us evaluate our attitude towards this world and remind us of the amazing mercy of God.

Hear now the word of the Lord starting at verse 1:

“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.” Jonah 3:1-5 ESV

We'll begin by making three observations from this text. Let's first look at this pathetic sermon.

1. A Pathetic Sermon

Now, did you catch Jonah's sermon in there? It was in verse 4:

“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Jonah 3:4

That's it.

The sermon is five words in the Hebrew. It's short, succinct, and seemingly void of compassion. Now that's not to say that this is the entirety of Jonah's message, but it certainly is all that we have in the Scriptures. What we have here is probably intended as a summary- which seems to indicate that Jonah made very little effort to give these people the good news. He certainly appears to be content with them receiving the bad news.

The proclamation contains judgment, not grace.

As short as this sermon is, we are going to break it down into its three parts:

Yet forty days

God gives the people of Nineveh 40 days to turn from their ways.

If you are a bible reader, then you'll immediately recognise this time frame of 40 days.

Throughout Scripture 40 days is symbolic. The Flood lasted 40 days, Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days, Jesus fasted for 40 days after his baptism. 40 days in Scripture represents a period of time in which a people or person may encounter God. It is a time of repentance and hope. God graciously gave this time to the people of NINEVEH.

That's the second part of this little sermon: the part which reveals the intended audience.

Nineveh

“Yet forty days, and **Nineveh** shall be overthrown!” Jonah 3:4

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Jonah's enemies. And it appears here that he didn't want his enemies converted. The Assyrians were a very cruel people bent on conquering the world. They sought the death of many Israelites living along the northern border of Israel. One commentator writes:

“Assyria stands alone among all the nations of the ancient world in its extreme cruelty of treatment of those who it captured.”¹

These were Jonah's enemies, and their capital was Nineveh. God sends Jonah there of all places. And of course, he doesn't want to go. Right, he went 500 miles in the wrong direction just two chapters earlier. He didn't just say no, he said no way. Jonah's reaction only makes sense when you know who his audience is.

¹ Gary Baxter, “Assyria, Nineveh and Jonah Part 1”, accessed online at <https://www.adeffenceofthebible.com> , 2020

After having been left in the belly of a large fish for three days, he was ready to make a change. But here we see how much of a change of heart he actually had. It looks like his heart didn't get the message. I wouldn't say he went to Nineveh kicking and screaming, but he was definitely reluctant and uncertain. His actions speak to that kind of attitude he had towards Nineveh. You'll notice in the text that Nineveh was a great city, three days' journey in breadth.² But it says that Jonah began to preach only going in a day's journey. What an interesting little detail to put in this story. Now, that's not to say he gave up or that he saw so much wickedness that he immediately left- the text doesn't explain the why- but it does reveal that not everyone would have heard this message from Jonah. And as we'll see in just a couple of minutes, even the king of Nineveh didn't hear this proclamation from Jonah. Jonah wasn't knocking on everyone's door pleading with them. He was shouting out their demise.³

Many of you will know that I'm a MK: a missionary kid. I was born and raised on the mission's field with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Papua New Guinea. There are many stories I could share but to illustrate what Jonah is doing here, it's like when we would go into the villages, we would make first contact with some of the tribesmen to build trust and relationships. Sometimes it would take years and years. One of our New Testament translations took 36 years to complete. Now if we were to have borrowed Jonah's approach we would have just shipped in some megaphones and gone village to village shouting in a language they didn't understand that they were all going to die. I don't think we would have gotten a great response. We probably would have ended up starting some tribal warfare.

But that's what Jonah is doing here. His pride stood in the way of him seeing God's mercy. And who was he – who are we- to decide who deserves grace and who does not? Who is our audience?

The final part of Jonah's pathetic sermon is:

² Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harrion (eds.) *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 848. Perhaps referring to the circumference of the complex including dependent villages.

³ Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer (eds.) *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 454. Jonah had not conveyed any sense of hope for deliverance.

Shall be overthrown

Nineveh will be overthrown.

That's the foreseeable outcome that this sermon details. Again, there's no hope here.

But there is an interesting play on words happening in the Hebrew text. In Jonah's proclamation he uses the Hebrew word for overthrown which is hapak.⁴ "Nineveh will be hapak." Now, hapak can mean a couple of things. It can mean simply to turn over. It can refer to something being destroyed, or it can mean for something to be changed and transformed. Clearly when Jonah said hapak, he thought this referred to an overthrowing leading to destruction. And he wasn't necessarily wrong. Hapak is used in Genesis 19 in reference to Sodom which was destroyed. But when Nineveh was overthrown, and this is how God ultimately meant hapak, it was a turning of repentance. A transforming turn- one which only God could have brought about.

What Jonah meant for evil; God used for good. That was God's message to the people of Nineveh- one which Jonah misinterpreted, but God ultimately fulfilled.

So, what did come from this pathetic sermon? That's the second main observation we want to see in the text.

2. Nineveh's Response

Well, as we just hinted at, miraculously, Nineveh repented. The city turned from their ways.

"The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence

⁴ Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harrion (eds.) *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 848. Although Jonah's message wasn't conditional, the outcome proved it to be so as God relented.

that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” Jonah 3:6-9 ESV

When word reached the king, again Jonah didn't even go to the king and start from the top with his proclamation, the king found out by word of mouth. But the king arose and took action. This pagan leader, full of pride and injustice, was immediately brought to his knees.

THAT'S the power of God.

Pagans become redeemed and prisoners become freed.

So, let's look a little closer.

In looking into Nineveh's response to this sermon, the text says that they believed in God, verse 5.⁵ The Hebrew word for God used here is important. It's the word Elohim. Elohim refers to “the divine council” or “heavenly being”. Interestingly, Elohim is not the covenantal name of God. That's Yahweh. Yahweh is the personal name for God reserved for his people. Jonah didn't tell them about Yahweh. And so, they did not know God as Yahweh, but rather as a great One who they knew must be worshiped. That revelation was enough because they did repent and worship.

So, Nineveh was transformed as they encountered Elohim and repented.

At the end of chapter 3, after God saw their repentance, he relented – he TURNED. Almost ironically, God saw their transformation and likewise turned away his wrath. The king said, “Perhaps God will turn and relent”. And God did.

That's Nineveh's powerful response, which leads to our third observation, which is:

3. Jonah's Reaction

⁵ Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 633.

Nineveh's powerful response was one to repentance. But when God relented what was Jonah's reaction? Jonah 4:1 says:

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.” Jonah 4:1 ESV

He was angry.⁶ Angry at God and angrier at these people.

He went, as the text says, to the east of the city and set up shop to have a front row seat to their destruction, but it did not come.

Picture this:

He goes out to sit in the hot sun for a month -remember 40 days; he's waiting there 40 days so that he can witness their end! He hated these people and wanted so badly for them to face the wrath of God. This pathetic sermon was followed by a terrible act: he abandoned them.

What an attitude!? What a powerful response against these people and God!?

Many other pagan societies at that time heard about God through the prophets like Jonah. But unlike the majority which turned their backs on God, these people didn't. And we know it wasn't because of Jonah's amazing job preaching. So why? Why did God relent?

Well, if we return to the story, I believe Jonah reveals the why. You see, I think Jonah tells God why he hesitated to go to Nineveh in chapter 4 verse 2 not because he didn't think God could save them, in fact, I would argue it was because he knew GOD COULD.⁷ If Jonah offered this message of salvation, the people may act upon it and God might even spare them, thus his enemies would be permitted to live.

⁶ Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harrion (eds.) *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 848. The commentary notes that this is an extreme reaction of woe and displeasure on Jonah's part.

⁷ See “The Book of the Twelve”. Daniel C. Timmer in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Wheaton: Miles V. Van Pelt, 2016), 333.

There's an Old Testament doctrine known to theologians as the compassion formula.⁸ This formula repeats many times throughout the Old Testament beginning in Exodus 34:6-7.⁹ And I think Jonah knew this formula and was afraid that God could save these people. Hear the formula now:

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” Exodus 34:6-7 ESV

The Lord is merciful to forgive and redeem. He is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Jonah knew that. He said that very thing in chapter 4 verse 2:

“And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that **you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love**, and relenting from disaster.” Jonah 4:2 ESV

He knew it.

Here he is repeating this formula. Although he wasn't willing to admit it at first, he knew that God was abounding in steadfast love and merciful. Nineveh's response is proof of that.

That's why we can't know who God will save. His mercy is more than we can imagine. It's more than we think our enemies deserve and it's certainly more than we deserve.

Understanding the Pathetic Sermon and these powerful responses require us to look beyond Jonah's missed opportunity and see a misguided opportunist. It's not about Jonah's bad attitude or his lackluster proclamation. Jonah thought he had the opportunity to watch a people fall- to finally witness some justice. But it's not about that.

⁸ See “The Book of the Twelve”. Daniel C. Timmer in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Wheaton: Miles V. Van Pelt, 2016), 322.

⁹ Steven Dempster, “The Book of the Twelve” in *What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About: A Survey of Jesus' Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Jason S De Rouchie, 2013), 305. Jonah quotes this formula in Jonah 4:2

I want us to remember that this story isn't about Jonah's failure, it's about God's favor- his mercy.

So now that we've made these three observations from the text on the pathetic sermon, Nineveh's response, and Jonah's reaction, let's answer the question:

What Can The Pathetic Sermon Teach Us Today?

There are a number of take-a-ways we might have when encountering the story of Jonah. But as I said off the top, my goal is that we would see that God will use us to accomplish his purposes in offering salvation. This sermon is about us going on mission in 2022.

What is going to help us be less like Jonah and more like our merciful God?

It's clear that Jonah was quicker to judgement than God. Jonah was more reluctant to show mercy.¹⁰ While God gave the people those 40 days, Jonah had already made up his mind that they were undeserving and would perish. Jonah looked at Nineveh and saw Sodom and Gomorrah, God looked at Nineveh and saw lost and hopeless people. So, they were given 40 days.

The first thing for us to take a-way today is that:

1. Jonah Points To Jesus

That's the first thing we need to be taught. The story isn't about Jonah, it's about God's mercy. A good place to start when trying to understand any Old Testament story is to see how it was used and interpreted in the New Testament. And it's always a bonus when Jesus himself speaks to the matter, so let's look at how Jesus responded to Jonah. He does so in Matthew 12.

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at

¹⁰ See Figure 14.4 in “The Book of the Twelve”. Steven Dempster in *What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About: A Survey of Jesus' Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Jason S De Rouchie, 2013), 316.

the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.” Matthew 12:40-41 ESV

Jesus is the better Jonah. Something greater than Jonah is here, and its Jesus. You see Jonah’s proclamation was that they would die in 40 days, but Jesus’ proclamation is that we can live forever. Jonah told them how they would die, but Jesus tells us how to live.

Where Jonah failed, Jesus redeemed.

Also, notice the comparison between Jonah’s 3-day encounter with the great fish and Jesus’ 3-day encounter with death itself. The typology of Jonah as a figure pointing towards Jesus is confirmed in Matthew 12. So, Jesus saw himself as the one who would properly proclaim salvation to the nations. As the greater Jonah, Jesus offers salvation. That was his mission:

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Luke 19:10 ESV

The most pathetic sermon now has the most beautiful ending- it is fulfilled in Jesus- he is the sign of Jonah. Jesus compares the Pharisees with whom he is talking to in Matthew 12, to the people of Nineveh. And notice the stark contrast. The Ninevites repented, the Pharisees had him crucified. The ones Jonah wanted dead were saved and the ones Jesus wanted to save called for his death. But as Jonah foreshadowed, Jesus didn’t remain in the heart of the earth more than 3 days before his resurrection- the greatest miracle of all. He rose making us fishers of men.

“And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”” Matthew 4:19 ESV

This is a story about mercy and mission.

Secondly, this story teaches us that:

2. God Does A Lot With A Little

Isn't that true? In this story even these 5 Hebrew words that Jonah proclaimed were used to turn an entire city. God did that! With such little, God does so much. I think of David and Goliath or that boy in the New Testament with the loaves of bread and fishes. We have a powerful God. That's why every effort we make CAN be used in miraculous ways for someone. We don't always need to give a grand pre-rehearsed speech. To the one whom God has prepared, little is much.

The truth is we don't know who is prepared to receive the gospel. That's why we are fishers of ALL men. The historical context behind this story reminds us of that. Why was Nineveh ready to receive this news? Well, in 763 BC, when the city's inhabitants were revolting, a great plague struck the land.¹¹ They were devastated and just a few years later Jonah shows up. He tells them about their oncoming demise, and they believe. They were ready to believe because they had been devastated by a plague.

So, Nineveh believes, repents, and is saved.

God surely can do a lot with a little. Even when we can't see what's going on. Little did Jonah realize that his words were all the people needed to hear. God had already sent a plague! The people were already hearing omens spoken around them of destruction! Que Jonah with this pathetic -yet providential- sermon. Jonah's sermon becomes the exclamation mark on God's POWERFUL sermon!¹² Perhaps God can likewise use our feeble attempts at evangelism as an exclamation mark for his greater story!

And just maybe there's a world out there right now ready to receive the gospel.¹³

¹¹ Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 630.

¹² Levi

¹³ Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harrion (eds.) *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 844. "The most unpromising mission fields are often the most responsive."

And just maybe there's a people out there suffering in disbelief and plague ready for the gospel-ready for something better; ready for hope.

Thirdly, in this story we are taught that:

3. Our Culture Will Be Judged By God

Our culture is going to be judged. Jonah was sent by God as a prophet to deliver his message. And it's a message, as we've talked about, to a pagan culture. Jonah isn't reminding Israel of who their God is; Nineveh is a pagan nation. A nation God is judging by holding them to a standard. These Assyrians are being held to a standard instituted by God. In fact, all people are held to a standard. BOTH the people of God AND the people of the world.

Look with me for a second at the writings of the prophet Amos. He said,

“Thus says the Lord: “For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds.” Amos 1:6-7 ESV

Amos is speaking about the judgement upon pagan Gaza, but look at chapter 3 as God deals with Israel:

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” Amos 3:2 ESV

Judgement begins in the household of God, yes, but PROCEEDS from there.

If you are here and thinking, “I don't want to be held to a higher standard,” then you've missed the point. Judgement is STILL coming. You must turn. Turn to this God of mercy because, according to this story, there is hope for you. God is exceedingly gracious. But should you tarry, your sin will find you out. God's standard will not falter for you. It didn't for Nineveh. There's a warning for us to see as we look at what happened next in Nineveh's history.

The books of Jonah and Nahum ultimately go together.¹⁴ Nahum followed Jonah by 150 years. Nahum was called to prophecy against this same city and announce its downfall. And Nahum's preaching was not a call to repentance. It was a decree of death for an evil people who returned to their evil ways. It's actually quite a sad story.

Assyria, and Nineveh as its capital, fell again into deep sin. And while God extended compassion to Nineveh through Jonah, he deals swiftly with them through Nahum. In 612 B.C. the city was destroyed and has since remained a heap of ruins. True repentance is lifelong. The journey of faith has no finish line to be seen. Only in death, when we come face to face with Jesus, do we finish this earthly race.

And so, our culture will be judged by God. We need to be taught to go because God's standard will not falter. It won't for us, and it won't falter for them, thanks be to God for his justice.

Finally, we need to be taught that:

4. We Have A Mission Of Mercy To The Nations

This is the most obvious application for us today. The people of God, Christian, you are on a mission right now to this world- starting in Orillia and going to the ends of the earth should he lead you. So how are you doing with that?

Have you done like Jonah and already passed judgement on someone or a type of person, or a certain class of citizen, deeming them undeserving of grace: the same grace which you have received! Jonah ran because he didn't want to do God's will.¹⁵ And after he preaches this sermon,

¹⁴ Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 634.

¹⁵ Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer (eds.) *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 453.

he again runs to get a good view of the city being destroyed. Are you going to run or are you going to stay and show mercy?

I want to end pastorally by laying my cards on the table. I'm afraid we've become so infatuated with our security, safety, and health that going out there to show mercy isn't at the top of our priorities list. In fact, I'm secretly really afraid that we as evangelicals, because we believe different things about COVID, restrictions, and government that we won't even be able to show mercy to each other right now. Could you show mercy to the person sitting next to you if you knew that they had a different view on masks, vaccines, or mandates?

We have a mission of mercy to the nations, but let's not forget about each other along the way. Judgement starts in the house of God and proceeds to the nations, so does mercy.

The story of Jonah ends with God asking Jonah in chapter 4 if he should show mercy to the people of Nineveh, but Jonah doesn't answer. In fact, the story ends with that question left purposefully unanswered. It leaves a space for you to answer it.

Does this world, including your friends and family -even your enemies- deserve God?

Do we get to decide who deserves him?

If you struggle to answer that question, then you are like Jonah, not Jesus who is the greater Jonah.

You are hanging onto your vine like Jonah did outside the city, but it just takes one little worm to bring that all down and then you are confronted with the reality that you would rather let this world to die and spend an eternity apart from God than confront the world and show it what an eternity with God looks like.

Don't write anyone off.

Don't neglect sharing the Gospel.

Ask yourself two questions as you head into this new year:

1. Do I believe in the mercy of God?
2. Do I extend the mercy of God?

Commit to both this year.