

## **Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park and Faith Family**

### **Title: Unexpected Repentance**

### **Lesson: Jonah 3:1-5, 10 NRSV**

*<sup>1</sup> The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup> So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. <sup>10</sup> 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.*

Good morning church! Today’s lesson is about prophet Jonah. He is famous for his story of disobedience to God. God said to him, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:1-2, NRSV) “But, Jonah set out to flee to Spain from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Spain...”(1:3) A few days ago, when I was reading the story of Jonah to Evan, my son. In the Bible book for baby, the reason Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh was described that he wanted the people in Nineveh to get the punishment by God due to their sins. Then, we may have questions. Why did he want them to be punished by God? And, why did he consider the people in Nineveh as evil? There are several theories, but there are two main views.

First, it is about elitism known as the chosen people. Israelites believed that they were chosen by God. Therefore, they tended to think that they were superior to other ethnic groups and gentiles who didn’t believe in

God. So, Jonah may have been exclusive to gentiles as a Jew. So, he may have thought that Nineveh must be punished by God as they serve idols.

Second, it is about Trauma theory. This theory suggests that Jonah's reluctance and silence was a result of the oppressive powers of the Persian Empire, Nineveh being the empire's principal and capital offender. Jonah, who was in one of the oppressed groups traumatized by the atrocities done by the Nineveh people, understandably may have wanted them extinguished and had no interest in providing the "just forty days more" warning.

Whether Jonah was a person who took an unfriendly attitude against gentiles or a person who dreamed of retaliation due to the history of being invaded, the important fact is that he disobeyed God's word. If we read this story as a parable, perhaps Jonah represents the thoughts of the Israelites at that time. The Israelites disobeyed God, just as Jonah did. And, they got the punishment by God, just as Jonah was thrown into the sea and swallowed by a large fish. After the punishment, when they realized their disobedience, and repented their sins, God listened, forgave and saved them, Just as Jonah prayed in the belly of the fish and was spewed out upon the dry land.

And, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." (1-2) So, he set out and went to Nineveh, following God's order. (3) He arrived in there, but he still had an idea that they should be punished by God. Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across, but he walked for only one day proclaiming, "Just forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (4) Jonah proclaimed the word of God, but did not expect the gentiles to repent. Perhaps he didn't want them to repent and be indebted to God's mercy.

But, something unexpected happened! Unexpected repentance had occurred. Jonah warned halfheartedly, and all the people in Nineveh, including the king began to believe God and repent their sins; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. (5) The people of Nineveh immediately confessed their sins to God and asked for forgiveness and mercy after hearing Jonah's proclamation. They took the forty days grace period of punishment as an opportunity for repentance. Finally, the Lord responded to their repentance, and they were not punished by God. (10)

God's love and grace are universal and transcendent, not just for one specific person or group. Jonah, who was an Israelite, may not have wanted gentiles or people who had harmed Israelites to get the love and grace of God. However, God is the God of love, the God of righteousness, and the God of grace. God listens to the prayers of those who confess their sins, not those who claim their own plan. And most of all, He is most pleased that the person who enters the wrong path returns to Him.

God's will is very different from human prejudice and standards. He loves everyone who returns to him. He is most pleased with the repentance of the sinner.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were like Jonah. In Matthew 12:38-39 NRSV, they ask Jesus for the sign that he is the Son of God. However, Jesus tells them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." If they had ears to listen and were people who truly loved God, not their doctrines, they would have accepted Jesus, who delivered love to sinners.

The reason why the Nineveh people confessed their sins to God was not because Jonah came back from the belly of the fish. The true heart to meet with God's will in truth changes life, not a miracle or a sign.

In the Gospel lesson we read today, Jesus calls Simon and his brother Andrew. Then immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus. And Jesus called James and his brother John. They also left what they were doing and followed Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ, to live as a Christian means to put aside our will and thoughts and live by striving to understand God's will. Beloved, I would ask you, "Do you stand on the side of Jonah or the people of Nineveh? Amen.