

Jonah 3:1-10—

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.' 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

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.

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No matter our age one thing that doesn't feel good at all is to be left out. I was just talking about it with the children. Do you ever remember being picked last in a pick-up kickball or basketball or softball game? Remember trying out for a musical group or a drama and not being chosen?

Such experiences might not be the worst thing that can happen, unless it comes to being left out of the kingdom of God...that is, not experiencing the love and grace of God.

The figure of Jonah in the story of 'Jonah and the Great Big Fish' qualifies as an example of being chosen and not considering or ignoring those who aren't aware they also are chosen.

Jonah was commanded to go to the ancient town of Nineveh and share with them the good news of God's love, mercy, and grace. He did not, and instead he fled, or so he thought, from God's presence. He chose not to love his neighbors in Nineveh. They were left out of the knowledge and hope of the blessings of God. We can come up with all kinds of reasons why he didn't go. Maybe Jonah was afraid. The Assyrians were mortal enemies. I

am the first to admit that to share the good news of God's love with others in a grocery line or those sitting next to me at a ballgame is not an easy or comfortable thing to do. It is easy to share the faith in this room, but not in Target or even with a next-door neighbor. Maybe Jonah was convinced that only a certain kind of people deserved or qualified to be in God's family. Maybe Jonah wanted to keep this relationship with God all to himself. To put it simply, Jonah chose or forgot to share with them the love and grace of God, God's great desire to gather all people into God's family. Instead of loving his neighbors in Nineveh, Jonah hopped onto a boat and headed for the comfortable beaches of Spain.

We call this room a sanctuary, which means a safe place, or a refuge. And it is. Here one can leave the cares and worries of the world behind. This is a good and comfortable place to be. The truth is that our world comes with us and should come. But the faith or religion can also seem like taking a high school or college class that doesn't seem relevant in preparing for a certain line of work. I mean, does loving neighbor, even enemies, work in the so-called real world? Yes! Does Jesus really expect us to give sacrificially and generously, even to the point of the widow who put all she had in the temple treasury? Yes! Doesn't God help those who help themselves? No!

In this real world, though, we discover there is a common hunger amongst people. This hunger is for more than food. Whether we agree with their cause or behavior, the revolutions in the Middle East are about freedom and purpose and meaning as they interpret it. There is a common hunger amongst most people for hope for themselves and their children. We are hungry for a way to deal with the dark side of life, those times when we feel abandoned and afraid, like Jonah being in the belly of a fish or in a storm. I happened to speak with a former parishioner the other day whose husband had just died. She asked me, as many have, "What do people do who choose not to turn to God when tragedy happens?" People also don't want to be left out, but loved, respected, feeling needed, and worthwhile. These spiritual, emotional, mental, peace-of-mind issues rank alongside food and shelter as necessities. Jonah had chosen to be blind to this. "So the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up and go to Nineveh and proclaim the message that I tell you." God said to Jonah, "Let's try this again." So Jonah reluctantly cleaned up and dried himself off and set out. He was still nervous, afraid, and reluctant, but he went as God directed.

Remember what Jesus told his disciples, "For God so loved the whole world he sent his Son." And Jesus commanded, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." This world or nations can be a next-door neighbor or family member or a citizen. Again it isn't the expectation we will become door-to-door peddlers of the Good News of Jesus, the claim that God gives us life by

undeserved love and grace. Yet, we are called to be intentional in sharing, so no one is left out of experiencing God's love. Maybe it can happen in a conversation with neighbor, family member, in a group when someone shares a stormy or dark moment in their lives. This is an evangelism moment to not only care, but also to offer our experience of the strength, peace, and hope we have in our faith. Maybe it is offering to bring a neighbor child to Sunday school. Maybe it is an extra can of soup or tuna for Bountiful Basket. Maybe it is an extra \$10.00 bill for a disaster relief effort. Maybe it is sponsoring one of the 300 plus El Salvadoran children people FoC support to the tune of \$60,000 per year. Maybe it is our Christos children giving over \$100 each of the last two weeks to Gathering Place, a place that serves meals without cost to needy people? Maybe it is raking the neighbor's lawn. Maybe it is an extra \$25.00 in the offering plate so our children's programs don't suffer. Maybe it is coming together on November 13th to celebrate sharing and doing the Gospel by promising financial support for 2012. Maybe it is -----? The whole world, all the nations await to be fed the Good News.

Jesus told a group of his believers, "If you continue in my name, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Jonah had shared and done this gospel.

So chapter three of the story of Jonah ends, "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." "So if the Jesus makes you free, you will be free indeed."

But there is a chapter 4 in Jonah's story. What is going to happen next with the servant Jonah?