

## *Missionaries of the Impossible*

‘Arise, go to Ninevah, *that great city*’ the Lord said to Jonah. That’s how the story of Jonah begins. Ninevah is a great city, but she has deteriorated because of evil on her streets. And God sends his prophet Jonah to Ninevah. Jonah wants no part of Ninevah. It’s a great city, but Jonah ain’t going.

Return with me to our morning reading from Jonah [page 774 in your pew Bible]. In twelve years of preaching, I’ve never preached on Jonah. It seems Providence leads us all here today. This most ancient story of an ancient city turning to the Lord is a beacon of hope for our troubled and violent times. And it is a commission for the people of God to speak the truth of God into the troubles that afflict our land.

The story of Jonah is unlike any other prophet in the Old Testament. We don’t hear long oracles and messages from the Lord like we hear in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. We hear the story of the prophet. The message is the man—God’s man, God’s prophet. The message is his story—his story of flight, his prayer in the belly of the great fish, his journey to Ninevah after his descent into the sea.

‘Arise, go to Ninevah, *that great city, Jonah.*’ Oh, but Ninevah is a city filled with problems. No, ‘problems’ is too light. The ‘problem’ is evil. The source of Ninevah’s evil is idolatry. Her idols have separated Ninevah from the hope of God’s steadfast love. Yet God sent Jonah to speak judgment upon Ninevah, not for her condemnation, but for her salvation.

So Jonah buys a ticket from his port of call at Joppa. But when he goes down to the harbor, approaches the ticket booth, and the attendant asks, ‘Ninevah or Tarsish?’ Jonah says *Tarsish*. Jonah is going AWOL. Jonah 1.11: Jonah was *fleeing the presence of the Lord*. Jonah is a fugitive prophet and that’s his destination. Tarsish is the place of escaping responsibility. Tarsish is a comfortable place, a wealthy place. That’s what we learn from 1 Kings 10. It’s a city of gold, silver, ivory—also peacocks and monkeys, oh my! Jonah would rather mingle with peacocks and monkeys than bother with the mess in Ninevah. Tarsish is the place where Jonah can live in denial.

Then while he’s sailing on the Joppa to Tarsish line, a storm kicks up. Not green or yellow on the radar—dead red. And while that tempest tosses the vessel in the sea, Jonah lies asleep in the hold. He’s in the inner part of the ship. Not only does he flee Ninevah, he’s fled the danger of the storm, seeking shelter until the tempest passes.

But the storm can't pass without Jonah's action and Jonah knows it. 'Pick me up and throw me in the sea' he tells the mariners. And what do you know? When Jonah enters the troubled waters, the storm finally calms.

Now this is the picture we have at the end of Jonah 1—Jonah in the troubled waters and the mariners safe on the deck of the ship. Then these Gentile sailors offer sacrifice to the Lord for deliverance from the storm. This story is completely upside down.

As one theologian remarked, Jonah and these Gentile sailors aren't only characters in one story—they're representing a much larger story. Think about the history of water and floods in the Bible. God's man—Noah—builds an ark so he will renew humanity through one family, one nation. The nations perish in the flood but Noah is saved. God saves Israel when she passes through the Red Sea, while Egypt perishes when the doors of the sea close again.

But Jonah's story is an inversion of those previous stories. Once he's thrown overboard, the boat becomes a temple for the nations. Gentile mariners offer sacrifices of thanksgiving to the Lord while God's prophet treads for his life in endangered waters.

Even when the great fish comes to swallow Jonah whole, God isn't done with Jonah. And God isn't done with his missionary people, Israel either. Jonah imprisoned in the belly of the fish prepares Israel for the years of imprisonment in Babylon. Nothing like some gastric acid and whale blubber to make you come to your senses. Nothing like 70 years of exile to remind you that God chose you not for your salvation alone, but *for the sake of the nations*. He has great cities beyond Israel.

*This* is how we're meant to hear Jonah's prayer in the depths. This prayer belongs in a story—the story of a runaway prophet, a missionary fleeing his calling.

Now, Jonah's prayer is a prayerbook for a soul at the end of her rope. It's a guidebook for praying from the depths of despair and darkness. If you came to see me and asked how to pray when you had no words, we might pray Jonah 2 together. But more than a prayer for discouraged souls, this is a prayer for a missionary repenting from his flight.

When my life was fainting away,  
I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you,  
into your holy temple.  
Those who pay regard to vain idols  
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Salvation belongs to the LORD<sup>1</sup>!”

With the faith that God hears the prayer of his prophet in the depths of the sea; with the confidence that vain idols cannot show us God’s love; with a good and right sacrifice of thanksgiving from his heart, Jonah is ready to be God’s missionary again. And then the whale vomits Jonah onto dry land. Jonah finds himself a three days’ journey away from Ninevah.

Ninevah is a great city that God loves in the midst of her idolatry. Look beyond our reading in 3:3. ‘So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Ninevah was an exceedingly great city...’ It’s a noteworthy Hebrew phrase there. Our pew Bible has this interesting footnote. Another plausible reading is ‘Ninevah was a *great city to God.*’ The first time God commanded Jonah to go to Ninevah, he said, ‘Arise, go to Ninevah, that great city...’ The second time he commands him, the narrator of Jonah describes Ninevah, not only as a great city, but a *great city to God.*

Ninevah is the city of an improbable repentance. That’s why Jonah worked so hard to avoid the task. To Jonah it’s a city of an improbable repentance, but it’s a great city to God.

And this great city to God will be overthrown<sup>2</sup>, but not in the way Jonah expected. Jonah is a prophet with a one sentence sermon. Would that all preachers could be that concise! Jonah’s one sentence sermon for Ninevah was this: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown<sup>3</sup>!” It sounds like Jonah forecasts another whirlwind, but it’s going to be dead red over Nineveh, not Jonah this time.

But surprise, surprise, Nineveh actually *believed* God. The whole city from youngest to oldest put on sackcloth and gave up food. An entire city began turning to the Lord. And then word reached the king of Nineveh. Was he going to be like Pharaoh and scuttle this whole movement? Surely the king would be overthrown. But no. The king decrees a fast for all people and their livestock. He calls for an end to violence and evil. And he places himself and the city he serves in the hands of

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Jon 2:7–9.

<sup>2</sup> Phillip Cary, 110.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Jon 3:4.

God's mercy. "Who knows?" the king of Nineveh said, "God may turn and relent from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

And what do you know? God saved Ninevah from judgment. But the city was still overthrown. Idols were dethroned; violence ended; kings bent the knee. The strongholds of Ninevah were overthrown and it was the best thing that happened to that city. She lived into her name—that great city to God.

Oh that the cities of America could live into that name—a great city to God. But strongholds must fall—the strongholds of racism, hatred, and violence. The evil doctrine of white supremacy has scourged the cities of our land for over 200 years, just as it scarred Charlottesville this weekend. And we know that the violence in Charlottesville was not a clash among locals, but many cities were represented in the shedding of blood. Lord Jesus Christ, heal our cities by your cleansing blood, for you died on the cross that every soul from every tribe, tongue, and nation might enter the joy of your Kingdom. Come and dethrone idols in our hearts and end violence so that we might live in peace and humility under Your Name.

One of the most important questions I ever heard in my life was a very simple question: do you love your city? A bishop asked a group of priests this question during a retreat. He said, "If you don't love your city, you need to move to a place you love." Do you love Knoxville? //

Last week, I mentioned the increasing difficulty we'll experience as biblical, orthodox Christians in this secular age. No one knows where our culture is going. I can't control what happens on that scale.

But this we can choose. We can choose a different path than Jonah. We can embrace our missionary calling in this time in this city. Our election in Christ is for the sake of others. [Not only the wounds of racism, but relational wounds, wounds that come from rejecting the Lord and his Kingdom]. We can choose to walk in this great city that God loves with the message of God's deliverance. We can pray that strongholds in our city will fall.

Above all, we should be people of hope. Why? Because we have stories throughout the Bible, just like the Jonah story, of great and startling reversals. And the greatest reversal of all is the triumph of the cross in the face of evil. The sign of death became the sign of life. In the spirit of Jonah's one sentence sermon, the cross overthrew an empire. As Phillip Cary said, ""A few centuries after the King of

the Jews died on a Roman cross, the Roman people were bowing down and worshiping him as God in the flesh.<sup>4</sup>

Do you love Knoxville, a city where 81% of our civilians don't care to attend church today? I want to love Knoxville like Paul loved Israel. Paul's words about Israel in Romans 9 sounds like the inversion of the Jonah story. Paul would do anything possible so that his Jewish family would confess Jesus as Lord. Paul would willingly be thrown in the sea, with all its dangers and tempests, if Israel could be saved.

Paul says, 'throw me overboard into Sheol' if Israel can be saved. I don't know of a better example in Scripture of a disciple living out the Lord's command to love your neighbor as yourself.

Here's a simple way to embrace our commission in this city, a very simple way of beginning to love your city more deeply. Do you know your neighbors' names? Are you praying for people that live closest to you—on your street, in your apartment complex? Bring a loaf of bread or some cookies to the door and introduce yourself. And pray that they will come to know the joy of the Lord.

I want to love Knoxville like Jesus loved his disciples in the eye of the storm. Read the story in Matthew again and you'll see the storm begins when Jesus is praying on the mountain. But when Jesus sees his friends threatened by the storm, he departs the mountain of prayer. He leaves the peace of that mountain to enter the storm and bring calm for his friends. It sure make a difference to help a friend in the middle of the storm when you know their name.

And we can bring calm into the greatest of storms, because Christ has given us his Holy Spirit. If we're going to be faithful missionaries in Knoxville, we have to begin praying with greater boldness. Now is not the time for timid prayers or modest requests so you won't be disappointed if the prayer isn't answered. Now is the time to pray for impossible things and situations. Have you given up praying for a person you love because you believe repentance is impossible? It's time to renew your prayer. I repent. I'm preaching to myself this morning. I think every believer needs to keep a separate category in their prayer list named Impossible. See what happens when you begin praying for the impossible.

This past Wednesday our vestry opened our meeting with some thought from C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis said, "The church exists for nothing else but to

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<sup>4</sup> Phillip Cary, 110-111.

draw all [people] into Christ, to make them little Christ's. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermon, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose.<sup>5</sup>

And so we enter the days ahead with no other purpose than the purpose to be God's prophetic people. To love this great city to God. To embrace our calling for this time and this hour to proclaim the Gospel of love that all can be saved in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.