

## **“A GOOD RESPONSE”**

**Jonah 3:1-10**

**January 21, 2024**

Once I owned a house that was built in 1966. It was a well-constructed colonial with a back deck and a front porch on a wooded lot. It wasn't a large house, but the layout made good use of the space and had a nice flow. There was easy access to all the utilities and an energy efficient furnace. Of course, no house is perfect.

For one thing, it had a 4' Crawl space under the family room. If the contractors had just gone down another 3' we would have had another storage room. The home came with a working fireplace that could use both wood or gas. It even had an ash door in the bottom that could be opened from the outside, but the heat pretty much went up the chimney and not into the room, making it rather useless except for looks. And then there was the 300-pound temperamental Garage door that didn't seem to like the cold any more than I do. I'm convinced it was the original door. Whatever composite material it was built out of, the layers wanted to separate. So, I kept sealing and painting it instead of replacing the door.

One morning, the door would not open up. On closer inspection I discovered one of the main springs had snapped. I did say this was a 300-pound door so, not an easy deadlift. While the motor initiates movement of a garage door it is really the springs that do the major lifting. There are some things I will attempt to fix on a house, but the

springs on a garage door are not on that list. First, to determine the appropriate torsion spring replacement you need to know the wire size, inside diameter, overall length, wind direction, and weight of the Garage Door. I knew none of that information. Secondly, it is dangerous to mess with springs under tension. If you don't know what you're doing and that tension releases unexpectedly. Well, let's just say you hope the only damage is to your house.

Speaking of tension, the book of Jonah is filled with it. First, we find a miserable prophet who refuses to heed God's call. Instead, he runs in the opposite direction that God sends him in. **Tension!** Then Jonah gets tossed off a ship and is swallowed by a big fish. **Tension!** Finally, he gets puked up and arrives safely on land. I can't even imagine the fish guts smell and disheveled look that was. This time Jonah decides to do what God says, but he is none too happy about it. And who could blame him.

Jonah is sent to the superpower of the region Assyria, reputed for its violence and wickedness. (Think Sodom and Gomorrah). The annals of the Assyrian kings reveal their bloodthirsty approach -- the piling up of the heads of their enemies, skinning people alive and using their skins to cover their monuments. Assyria was a bitter, hated enemy to whom smaller nations, including Israel, owed tribute. And yet, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, telling him to go to Assyria, to its capital city of Nineveh, **"and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up**

**before me."** Talk about **tension**, fear, and hatred. It is no wonder Jonah didn't want to go. Why not just stick my head on a spike and get it over with. As I said, there is a lot of tension in the story.

## **I. NOT MUCH OF A SERMON**

In the Guinness Book of World Records there is listed the shortest sermon ever preached. It was given by **John Albrecht**, an Episcopal priest in Michigan (not a surprise it was an Episcopal priest – no good Presbyterian minister would ever get the short sermon prize.) Anyway, Priest Albrecht stood in his pulpit to preach, paused, and said "**Love!**" He then sat down. Later on, some of Albrecht's parishioners said it was the best sermon he ever preached. Just in case any of you are getting excited...This is not that sermon.

Our reluctant prophet's sermon in Ninevah isn't that short, but it's pretty darn close. After traveling into the city suburbs, fish smelling Jonah cries out, "**Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.**" In the Hebrew language it is only 5 words, which basically translates, "**In 40 days Nineveh dies.**" It is a good guess that Jonah delivered the message with all the enthusiasm we have when paying our taxes. How would you like to hear that sermon on a Sunday morning? But technically, fearfully, and reluctantly, Jonah did what God asked him to do, short, boring sermon and all. What happens next is rather shocking.

## **II. SHOCKING RESPONSE**

When we go to the doctors the hope is we will get a good report. And if we need some form of treatment, we want what is prescribed to work. We desire the cholesterol numbers drop, the weight comes off, the pain goes away, the hip to move freely again, the cataract is removed, and the vision is clear. Who goes to the doctor hoping to hear things have gotten worse, and the treatment we were receiving didn't work? We want a good response.

The shock of the story is that the Ninevites respond favorably to Jonah's dreary message.

**“And the people of Ninevah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small put on sackcloth.”** The people believed the word spoken to them and they responded by humbling themselves and turning from their violent ways. **Go figure!** Even the King has a good response. He removes the symbols of his office, namely his throne and royal robe, he humbles himself with sackcloth and ashes, symbols of death and contrition, cries out for mercy, stops eating and drinking, and issues a royal proclamation that all people and their animals do the same. No one would have guessed such a response from these wayward people.

It's pretty clear from the context that follows that this wasn't part of Jonah's vision. He did his duty and then sat back to watch God smoke these pagans. Didn't happen. God's word actually worked!

I wonder, how often do we expect, really expect, that God's word

is actually going to change things? How often do we preachers soften or squelch that word because we're just not sure that we believe it ourselves? The reality is that when God's word is proclaimed, stuff happens — lives are changed, people go in other directions, sin is stopped in its tracks. Yeah, it'll probably take awhile, but we're called to be faithful, not fast. We need to always call out the word God has given us with a clear voice and listen with an ear tuned to how that word will land.

Don't underestimate the work of the Spirit moving through the word of God.

### III. WHO KNOWS

Ranchers in the American West have learned there's a big difference between the behavior of **buffalo** and that of **cattle** when confronted with an **oncoming storm**. Left to themselves, the cattle will generally panic and attempt to run away. Many are lost to injuries, as the storm inevitably overtakes them. The buffalo, on the other hand, seem to know instinctively that the storm must be faced resolutely. They turn in the direction of the storm, heads downward, and walk slowly into the wind. Storm-related injuries or deaths for buffalo on the Great Plains are much less common than for cattle.

One of the shocking parts of this story is the pagan **King of Nineveh** seems to have more spiritual insight than the prophet **Jonah**. After issuing the national call of repentance the king said, “**Who**

**knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”** Jonah thought his condemning word of destruction was a done deal. Whereas the king was willing to believe there is another word from God or at least a chance. Y. might relent. Y. is not an uncaring tyrant or closed to redemptive possibility. The king is willing to be like the buffalo and turn into the coming storm with hope in his heart. There is no guarantee the Lord will respond favorably, but why not? The King had good theology. He saw the character of God was able to act freely and able to act graciously and generously. God could create new possibilities. God is not flat, unchanging, predictable. Jonah, God’s prophet, lacked any sort of such imagination and hope.

Here is the real tension in the story. **It is the tension between God’s capacity for judgment and God’s freedom in forgiveness.** The King realized that God's power is not limited by our human frailties, that God can and does speak through weakness, our resistance, our insecurity, our sinfulness.

**Barbara Brown Taylor, "Ninevites and Ne'er-Do-Wells"** in *Gospel Medicine* writes, “We are such bookkeepers! And God is not! When the Ninevites repent, and the ne'er-do-wells at the end of the line get paid the same as the hard workers at the front of the line, and the people we judge most harshly receive the mercy of God, then it becomes painfully clear that there is something inherently unfair in the notion of

grace. God does not keep track of things the way we do. God does not spend a lot of time deciding who is worthy and who is not, like we do.

God does not give any of us what we deserve but what we need, and it is hard -- very hard -- to trust God's judgment on that score. Is it right for us to be angry? If Nineveh is spared, who won't shout hallelujah? And if those who show up at the end of the day open their envelopes to find a full day's pay, who will not rejoice? Only those who do not know who they are. The rest of us will be down in Nineveh at the party, whooping it up with all the other folks who do not know their right hands from their left, and also many animals."

Francis Bacon, famed English philosopher and statesman once wrote, It is not what men eat but what they digest that makes them strong; not what we gain but what we save that makes us rich; not what we read but what we remember that makes us learned; not what we preach but what we practice that makes us Christians.

Here is the question for the church. **Where is our Ninevah?** Who are the people that need to hear a word from the Lord? Who have we written off as lost and beyond all hope? Who is God sending us to? If we can answer that question, will we make a good response? Will we be like the reluctant, vengeful prophet Jonah whose only word is **die**, or will we have the capacity to proclaim a word of grace in the midst of the violence? Or put another way, if we don't want to smell like old fish, perhaps we had best get to fishing. Amen.

## **First Presbyterian Church in Hawley**

### **Sunday, January 21, 2024**

### **Second Scripture Lesson**

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#### **Jonah 3:1-10**

<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>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." <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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be To God**