

“The God of Second Chances”

Introduction: As you scan the overall storyline of the Bible, moving from patriarchs, prophets, poets, and priests, to the amazing description of the birth of Jesus known as the incarnation, the Word being made flesh so that God could live our life and die our death, you’ve got to conclude that this God is on something of a quest! Beginning with his promise to Abraham to bring blessing to all nations, God is on a quest to bring the human race, that has wandered so far from his love and from his purposes, back into a healthy and fruitful relationship with him, with themselves, with one another, and with creation.

Jonah, who we have been traveling with during this advent season, gives us a picture of just how far in this quest God is willing to stretch with the reach of his compassion. His compassion extends, we have seen in the first two chapters, to include a shipload of pagan sailors as well as a sulking, reluctant, self-absorbed little prophet named Jonah, who thought he knew better than God.

This morning, we’ll see it continue to stretch outside the borders of Israel to a nasty group of people called the Ninevites whose ways, we read, were evil and violent (3:8). As they receive God’s message through Jonah, we want to notice the response that God calls for when he reaches out with his compassion. Not unlike the Good Samaritan in that famous parable told by Jesus, in which an enemy of God’s people models what true love of neighbor looks like, the Ninevites will model what true repentance looks like: it’s a repentance which responds by bearing the fruit of a changed life, a life reoriented toward the living God.

I. God’s Penetrating Message

A. Jonah, as we saw last week, has just experienced the depth of God’s grace for him in the huge fish that God sent to scoop Jonah up from certain death at the bottom of the sea. After giving Jonah three days and three nights to think about the compassion that God had extended to him, God has the fish spit Jonah out onto dry land and then gives Jonah a second chance to proclaim his message to the city of Nineveh. It’s as if the plot begun in chapter 1 rewinds and begins again. Only this time, Jonah goes. Jonah goes, and he preaches, and the Ninevites respond by putting put their faith in God, taking time to fast and pray, and then turning from their evil ways. God then responds by relenting from his threat to destroy them. It’s a remarkable transformation by any measurement. How does it happen?

B. The best we can say is that as Jonah spoke God’s word, the Spirit of God was at work, piercing the consciences of his hearers.

The opening lines of the prayer that is Psalm 38 come to mind:

LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.
Your arrows have pierced me and your hand has come down upon me.

The word that spoke creation into being, the word that became flesh in Jesus, the word that is the sword of the Spirit, is truly powerful. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, God’s word is “alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). It is also organic, like a seed, as Peter describes it, which gives us both new birth, and enables us to grow from that birth (1 Pe. 1:23-2:3). It can penetrate our heart as we read it, and it can change the hearts of others as we share it.

C. Now we probably only get the summary statement of the message God gave to Jonah to share: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” But from this statement, it’s pretty clear that Jonah shared about the justice of God, that the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land (1:9), is also a God who cares about how the people he made use the gift of life that they have been given. If it’s used unjustly, in a way that is violent, oppressive, and selfish, then this God will not respond kindly but will respond with fierce anger. It’s an anger that is not irrational or out of control, like human anger tends to be; rather, God’s anger is an anger that comes out of love, an anger that is righteous, an anger that cares deeply for the victims of violence, or oppression, or selfishness.

II. The Ninevites Fruitful Response

A. From the response of the Ninevites it seems clear that the word of God had penetrated their hearts. It began with simple belief in this God (v. 5), but it didn’t end there, with merely verbal assent. It was, rather a belief that led to a time of penitence, when everyone in the city, from their mighty King on his throne to their lowliest beast in the field, took time to fast and pray, to call “urgently on God,” as the king exhorted his citizens. And, importantly, it didn’t end there either, but led to a change in behavior, a turning from their evil and violent ways.

B. I can’t help but think of God’s call on his people Israel, through the prophet Isaiah, to make their time of fasting acceptable to the Lord. This meant not just abstaining from food and going around in public looking miserable so that everyone knew you were fasting, but actually changing evil behavior and pursuing justice, eliminating exploitation of their workers, and providing for the hungry and the homeless (Isa. 58). If you do this, says the Lord, you will be “like a well-watered garden” (Isa. 58:11).

Illustration: I’m not sure if this is where she drew the image from, but one of the great “mothers” of the church, St. Theresa of Avila, a 16th c. Carmelite nun and Spanish mystic, talks about prayer toward this end. She writes that we are each like a garden and our task is to draw water, which she describes as prayer, in order to participate in making the flowers and plants grow and bear fruit. She wants to emphasize that we don’t draw water from a well just for the sake of having fun hauling up a bucket (or turning on a hose), but for the growth of the plants, which she describes as the virtues, or deeds of love. So then, like the fasting described by Isaiah, we are not just to experience God in prayer for its own sake, but for the sake of others. In fact, although Theresa was the founder of a community of cloistered, contemplative nuns, she was incredibly down to earth, and suspicious of a prayer life that became too centered on the experience of visions and the like. So she advised superiors that if they had a sister in whom this was happening, that they should give her extra work in the kitchen. That, she concluded, should take care of any visions or prayer that had become too centered on oneself!

A writer named Thomas Green sums it up nicely: “The experience of God . . . must always, if it is genuine, fructify in the love of God and the love of neighbor” (*When the Well Runs Dry*, 77).

C. All of which actually brings us, helpfully, I think, to the preaching of the familiar advent character of John the Baptist. The son of the priest Zechariah and his previously barren wife Elizabeth, John’s role was to prepare people for the coming of the Lord, the same Lord who is the God of Jonah as well as the new God of the Ninevites. He is gracious and compassionate but, as John reminds his listeners, is also holy and just and therefore not to be trifled with. So, “produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” John exhorts all who are curious and come out to the wilderness to hear what he has to say. As he goes on to explain, you will come to bear the resemblance of the family of God not from your

heritage or country of origin, but from a life that has been “fructified” in love of God and love of neighbor. So, as the text goes on, the people rightly ask: What should we do then? What does this look like? (Lk. 3:10-14):

¹¹ John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” ¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

Much like we read in Isaiah 58, true and fruitful repentance involves a life that is being reoriented along the way of the Lord, caring for the needy, and not using one’s position or power to take advantage of another.

D. As we look back from here to Jonah and the Ninevites, there has been much discussion as to the actual nature of the faith and the repentance of the Ninevites. Was it real? Was it partial in some way, or incomplete? All I can say is that what we read in the text tells us that in response to the preaching of Jonah, the Ninevites believed, such belief led to fasting and prayer, which in turn led to lives that were becoming reoriented to the way of the Lord. In the words of John the Baptist, they were producing fruit in keeping with repentance. In response, God remained true to his character and made good on the grace and compassion he was extending to them.

Not only are later readers, both the Israelites as well as us, to be challenged, and hopefully be grateful for, the lengths and the depths to which God will stretch with his compassion, this account also calls us to notice the changed lives of this people, and to ask: “Has God’s word penetrated my heart to the extent that it penetrated theirs? Is my life bearing the fruit of repentance, and if not, where might I need to reorient along the way of the Lord?