

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

In your opinion, who was the better preacher...Jonah or Jesus? If we were to decide based upon visible results, such as the number of people converted to the Faith, we would have to go with Jonah. Nineveh was a great city. Including its suburbs, sixty miles in circumference. It took three days just to walk through it. A great many people--more than 120,000--lived there. All of them heathen, disgustingly wicked. There wasn't a righteous man to be found. Nineveh was worse than Sodom; at least Lot lived there.

But as a result of Jonah preaching in Nineveh, not just a few were converted...the whole city was! "*From the greatest of them to the least of them.*" This was bigger than the baptism of the three thousand on Pentecost. An amazing success for Jonah!

But Jesus? In our Gospel reading, four men follow Him. Later on, a few more. Oh, He did preach to multitudes, but in John 6 after He fed the 5,000, nearly all of them left Him. He walked to the cross a lonely man; a preacher without a congregation except for one lone thief.

Jesus even tells us that Jonah's success was much greater than His. In Matthew 12 He says that the men of Nineveh will stand up in the Judgment and condemn the very people Jesus was preaching to, because they repented, He says, at the preaching of Jonah, and His hearers didn't.

But even as we marvel at Jonah's success, we would have to label him as perhaps the worst prophet of all time. He refused to go to Nineveh the first time God called him. He went the second time, but after he finished preaching, he sat down outside the city waiting for it to be destroyed. When the disaster never came, Jonah became angry--angry that the city was spared. Can you imagine your pastor preaching to you and then praying that you don't repent so that God punishes you and destroys you? That was Jonah. The best and the worst all rolled into one.

If the worst preacher of all time can have the greatest success of all time, this should tell us, as plain as the nose on our face, that it's not the preacher. Good, bad, ugly, handsome, a winning personality, or a real dope...preachers don't convert anyone. God does, through the message that the preacher preaches. Jonah's success was not in any way connected to him. Nor was Jesus' failure to win multitudes to the Faith in three years of preaching connected to Him. His hearers simply hardened their hearts, and Jonah's hearer's hearts were opened by the mercy of God.

What else can explain Nineveh except for that mercy? Nineveh was a city that everyone would say did not deserve to be spared. They tortured those that they conquered--even their helpless victims--and they conquered everyone around them. They were even the enemy of God's people. An enemy that had no compassion, no mercy whatsoever. No wonder Jonah did not want to go. He wasn't afraid of them. He didn't want God to spare them.

Dear people of Nineveh. Yes, you heard me correctly...Dear people of Nineveh...What? Does this offend you? Do you resent being connected to Nineveh in any way, shape, or form? "How dare you call me a citizen of Nineveh! I'm not like them. I don't deserve to perish as they did!"

For anyone of us, me included, who truly thinks this way, that one is lost. And such a person will perish unless they repent.

Maybe you and I do not need to repent of torturing our victims, or of living in ways that are completely godless. But we do need to repent of something that is far worse: thinking, believing that we deserve to be spared, that we deserve mercy, that we deserve forgiveness.

If you deserve anything good from God, then what do you need Jesus for? If you and I are not born completely “*dead in our trespasses and sins*,” as Ephesians 2 puts it, born God’s sworn enemy, as Romans 5 puts it, then we don’t need a Savior to resurrect us from death to life, and to reconcile us to God. We just need a little tinkering; maybe a self-help book on how to be a Christian, and we’re good to go.

Dear people of Nineveh, repent, because you have a merciful God. If God was not merciful, He never would have sent Jonah to Nineveh. But He did. And God has given a Jonah to you also who, hopefully is not as bad as the first Jonah was, but even if he is, God’s mercy and His work within you is in no way connected to who Jonah is, but instead to that which Jonah preaches.

Jonah preached that disaster was coming. But it never came. He went outside the city walls, and sat, and waited. “Forty days!” he had preached, “before the disaster comes.” Jonah needed to wait longer than forty days for that disaster, for God’s punishment to come. He needed to wait eight hundred years. The disaster that God had threatened did come, but it came upon a man hanging from a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. God punished His Son, Jesus Christ, for the sin of Nineveh. That’s why God spared the city...because all the wickedness of Nineveh was charged to Jesus.

If God spared Nineveh, and He did, there isn’t one of you who is without hope. If God didn’t want to show mercy to you, He wouldn’t have put His Jonah up here in the pulpit to preach to you. Jonah preached to Nineveh that disaster was coming. This Jonah preaches to you that the disaster has already come. It came on Good Friday to a place called Calvary. God punished His Son so completely, that there is no punishment left for you. None of us deserves to be shown mercy. But that’s what makes it mercy. It’s not what we deserve. It’s what we do not deserve.

Nineveh is a wonderful lesson for us. God could not have picked a more wicked city to spare. Why did He choose Nineveh? Perhaps to show you, friend, that no one is too wicked that God cannot show mercy to that one. Every sinner here today, from the greatest to the least, is forgiven. God forgives all of you. That sin which you think is too awful for God to forgive--Jesus already bore it on the cross for you. God forgives that sin, too.

When I call you a citizen of Nineveh, I am calling you a sinner whom God has spared. “(God) *did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all.*” That’s why He spares you. No disaster awaits you. Not because we don’t deserve it, but because Jesus took it for you.

“*The men of Nineveh,*” says Jesus, “*will rise up in the Judgment...*” And so will you. You will rise up in the Judgment because you daily rise with Christ in Baptism. God’s Spirit who brought more than 120,000 to the faith in Nineveh, who worked faith in 3,000 on Pentecost through Holy Baptism, is the same Spirit who brought you to Jesus when you were baptized. Every single day you live as God’s baptized child. And every day you can remember this story of Nineveh; remember that God spared the city out of mercy--the same mercy that poured out of the wounds of Christ on the cross--the same mercy that was poured over you in Baptism. Amen.