

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY 15 JUNE 2014**  
**Rev. Anneke Oppewal**  
**Jonah 3; Psalm 90; Ephesians 3: 6-21**

**“One More Step”**



Two chapters in, and it looks like we are back to square one in the story of Jonah. Again, we are told, the Word of the Lord happens to Jonah: “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

So far, it seems, there has only been delay. Jonah hasn’t even started what God called him to do at the beginning of the book. The people in Nineveh are still in the dark, with no word of God and his will has not reached them yet. And not for want of trying on God’s behalf! On the contrary. It is his prophet, Jonah, the dove, the carrier pigeon chosen to convey God’s word to Nineveh, who has taken a circuitous route and has been plain obstructive in the implementation of the task God has charged him with. With the seaweed still around his head, he has been pulled up from the deep, put back on his two feet and told again: “Get up and go to Nineveh”.

Sound familiar? How many times do you think God, through all our contrariness, pig headedness, and unhelpful obstruction, fails to get us to do as God asks? How often does God have to start over with us from the beginning, to get us to do what he wants us to do, or be where he wants us to be?

“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” Go, tell them Jonah!

And wouldn't we be justified in expecting an extraordinary, wonderful sermon now, after all that's happened?

A man who has just experienced God’s faithful, merciful response to his own transgressions, bringing him back from the path of disobedience that he himself had chosen to go down? A man who has just surfaced after three days in utter darkness, in the belly of a big fish, buried under an ocean of death and destruction? Who could be better suited to tell others about the goodness of God and the possibility of new life to be received from God’s hands?

If ever there was one, here is a man suited to tell a great and evil city what has happened to him when he chose to turn his back on God’s commandments, and drowned in his own disobedience and pride. How he was saved, how his life was turned around, how immense God’s compassion and God’s patience with him proved to be.....

Perhaps we’re not entirely back to square one. After Jonah received God’s command and decided to walk away, a lot has happened! Jonah has been born again, has been turned around, has found himself pulled from the deep and put back on track, heading in the right direction.

Remember that beautiful psalm he composed in the belly of the big fish, about God’s faithfulness and saving power? Eloquent, poetic, full of exquisite turns of phrase, and references to God’s Word as he himself knows it from scripture! Surely we can be excited by the prospect of a sermon that will further

build and expand on that? A sermon all the more profound because it is informed by his own, recent, experience?

“And”, the text says, “Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, three days walk across”. Yes, that’s right, three days to walk from one end of the city to the other. Say New York, or London, or Mumbai, or Rio de Janeiro. A city like so many in the world. Large, teeming, full of life, filled with evil, full of crying shame.

Jonah starts to enter the city. And he cries out: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” He starts, but then he stops.

Jonah! You can’t be serious! Is that all? What are you doing? Five words! And not even half way in!

Jonah doesn’t venture far. One day into his journey, Jonah stops and stays on the periphery. The same number of days Jonah spent in the fish is now to be used to cross the city. Three days walk across, is this woeful city, with the crying shame of its sin reaching all the way up to heaven.

Jonah, better than anybody else, should know that it is possible, with God’s help, to get to the other end of three days. But no, Jonah is only prepared to dip a toe into this immeasurable depth: one day’s journey.

He doesn’t make any effort to get to know the people of Nineveh. He doesn’t talk to them. He doesn’t, like a messianic figure should, take their wellbeing to heart. He does not, like Abraham did for Sodom, stand up and beg God to spare them. He does not, like Jesus, offer to stand in for them, and take their sin upon himself so they can live.

Jonah doesn’t even take the trouble to make the name of his God known to this city, nor does he come clean about his own past and need for mercy and salvation. He doesn’t mention a possible change of direction, or hope of redemption and salvation.

He doesn’t speak, like Paul to the Ephesians, about his own weakness, and the miracle of grace he himself has experienced. A short, acrid exhortation, fire and brimstone, is what Jonah delivers. Not a word of grace.

Only as far as Jonah himself can see does Jonah prophesy: If you continue like this, you will be going to the dogs in no time. If you continue like this, there is no hope for you, no life, no future.

And might we, at this point, not recognise ourselves in Jonah? Too often where we speak, where the Church comes up against sin, against injustice, against the crying shame of a world lost in brokenness, our own fragility, our own weakness and fallibility is kept out of sight, while we carry on about the fallibility and fragility of others.

Too often, we are tempted to present God as a threat, as the big bogeyman who will come and punish, rather than the God of love, of hope, of new beginnings and of miraculous grace and mercy, who keeps the future open even for the worst of sinners.

How many of us lack in enthusiasm and dedication when it comes to proclaiming God’s compassionate love to the world? We go to Church every Sunday without expecting anything more than the comfortable feeling that we’ve done our duty and believe God should be grateful for us dipping our toes in? How many of us are prepared to take on the sin of this world? How many of us are prepared to venture deeply into whatever it is that ails the world around us and travel its breadth and width to shine God’s light on it, to get involved in turning things around? How many of us are prepared to speak of God’s mercy passionately, eloquently, poetically and compassionately?

Too often, we do exactly as Jonah does: not expecting any change, we tend to give up before we have even started. The pain and suffering of this world are often so overwhelming that we stay at the periphery, crying shame, but hesitant to enter into it, and actively and positively engage with it. We find it difficult to

believe that God's grace could save the world from something that goes so deep and so far that we can't see how there could ever be an end to it.

The story of Jonah tells us that the impossible is possible. That miracles happen. With or without us. The people of Nineveh turn around, turn away from violence and death. They stop violating each other and the world they inhabit, and they cry out to God for mercy.

Jonah's prophesy comes true, but in a different way than he had anticipated. Jonah, God's prophet, in spite of himself, has spoken God's truth without intending to do so.

"Another 40 days and Nineveh will be turned upside down" he said. And it is turned upside down, just not in the way he expected it to be. Everything in the city, people, animals, young and old, big and small, they turn from darkness to light, from evil to righteousness.

The forty days are not the countdown to disaster, but they are forty days of reflection, of sobering up and coming to their senses; forty days of learning a new way of life, a new way of being in the world; forty days in the wilderness, like Israel spent forty years in the wilderness. Like Eliah, like Moses, like Jesus, like the Church does every year in Lent, spending forty days to focus, to reflect on their ministry, to find their core, to learn, to practice a different way of life, to practice a different way of being. Fasting and covered in sackcloth and ashes, Nineveh turns around towards God. They turn away from violence, from evil, from destruction and death. Suddenly, another story begins to shine through in this miserable place, the messianic story, where shame and death are converted into hope, faith and new life.

It is a conversion from the bottom up that happens. In this, Nineveh turns itself upside down as well. Before word reaches the King, it travels the width and breadth of the city. From the periphery where Jonah has given his sparse message, the Word carries itself around the city until it reaches the halls of power.

And then, even the King shows he's got the message. He changes from a powerful King of an exceedingly great and evil city into a servant of his people who lays down his crown.

Here again, the future figure of the Messiah shines through: The King of Nineveh becomes a King without glory, who shows his people the way to a different future. His clear and detailed instructions are in stark contrast with the five words Jonah uttered earlier on, showing that here is someone who's been touched by God and is prepared to act on it.

We become aware that this big, bad metropolis consists of people, big and small, young and old, and even animals, who are precious in God's sight. They are individuals worth loving, who are capable of compassion and care, of growth and insight into conversion and change. An anonymous mass starts to break up into separate bodies, faces, characters, people; people who decide to let go of the violence, the inhumanity, the injustice that has been the hallmark of their society; people who put a faithful appeal in to God, in hope of mercy, love, and compassion.

Who knows! God might change God's mind, God might turn around and let go of his anger.

The people of Nineveh have understood more of the gospel than Jonah is prepared to proclaim to them. They put their faith in a God who relents, who listens, who is prepared to offer those who are prepared to change their ways a new start, who can be moved to change their resolve.

And God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, and God changed his mind about the calamity that God had said would come upon them; and God did not do it.

God sees what they do, and how they turn away from their evil ways. He sees how the violence, the inhumanity of their society is changed. And God turns towards them, in love, and makes peace with them.

And so God calls us, like the people of Nineveh, with the words of the apostle Paul: Change is possible, don't lose hope. In the power of the Holy Spirit, with growing faith and trust, rooted in God's love, you can work on a different world, a different order.

Like Jonah, we are people who have experienced God's love and mercy in our lives. We have emerged from the waters of baptism. We carry the songs of God's grace and mercy in our hearts. We are people who share bread and wine at the table of the Lord. Like Jonah, after choosing to turn away from God, we are people who may have found ourselves pulled up from the deep, saved from inside of the belly of the fish and brought back to life.

God calls us to let that show, to let it radiate, to let it penetrate the world, and proclaim that there is a God who so loves the world that he will do anything to save it. That there is a God who is prepared to enter into your world of darkness and despair, and stand up for you, even stand in for you to take on the forces of evil and bring change, hope, life and light.

Go, believing that nothing is impossible. Go, and carry God's grace into the world. Be generous, be outrageous in your faith, even where the odds seem to be overwhelmingly against you. Go in faith, proclaiming the Word, sharing of your own experience that God's love is at work, bringing healing, peace, and justice. Amen.