

June 24, 2012

Text: Jonah 3:1 – 4:1

Title: “The City that Heard and Acted”

(Series: Feeling for the City What God Feels for the City)

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First Baptist Vancouver

Darrell W. Johnson

What an amazing story! What a wonderful miracle! Much greater than the sending of the great fish, for which the book of Jonah is more famously known. Much greater than many of the miracles recorded in both the Old and New Testaments. An entire city – some 120,000 people by God’s counting. An entire city – which God Himself twice calls “the great city.” An entire city – about whom God says, with compassion, “...they cannot tell their right hand from their left” (4:11). An entire city hears a word said to be from the Living God; an initially offensive word. Believes the word. And acts on it. The whole city - “from the greatest to the least” (3:5) - hears a message spoken by a prophet from another country. Takes the word seriously. So seriously that the whole city enters into a time of deep repentance. And, as is promised to all who repent, the city finds mercy and grace and a new lease on life. What a wonderful miracle! A miracle for which many of us are praying in our time!

“We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond).” Printed on all our official publications, it is our church’s identity and mission statement. “We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond).” A community. As you likely read in this past week’s issues of the Vancouver Sun and the Globe & Mail, the need for community is critical in our city. People are longing to connect, to belong, to know and be known. It is, of course, the inherent longing of creatures created in the image of a relational Creator. The Creator is Himself Community, a Relationship, a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We were made by and for that Community, by and for that Relationship. We are fundamentally communal, relational beings.

“We are a community ...” Called together by the Risen Jesus to be that community within an alienated, fractured world, where people of every race and ethnicity and economic status, find their place in the eternally existing Divine Community. “We are a community ... following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond).”

I do not want to sound like a broken-recorder – but as I have been suggesting the past weeks, we need to make a small adjustment in our identity and mission statement ... a small adjustment with large implications. I think we need to change the article “a” to the pronoun “His.” To change “a heart for the city” to “HIS heart for the city.” It will help make for authentic community, on the one hand. And it just might help make for a Nineveh-like miracle in our city, on the other. “We are a community following Jesus with His heart for the city.”

And nowhere else in the Bible is His heart for the city more clearly revealed than in the Old Testament book of Jonah. The book is all about the Holy, Living God’s heart for cities. The book is all about the Holy, Living God’s feelings for cities. Not just God’s

vision for cities. Not just God's ideas about cities. Not just God's plans and purposes for cities. But God's feelings. The book is all about God getting His people to feel for the city what He feels for the city.

In the miracle recorded in Jonah 3; in the miracle on Broadway and on River Trigris Street and on Desert Palm Avenue in Nineveh; we see where God's feelings for the city lead. God's feelings lead to an entire city, a Gentile city, repenting at the preaching of a reluctant Jewish prophet.

Repenting. Do not be put you off by the word. It simply means, "changing your mind." It simply means, "turning around." Something all growing, maturing humans do all the time. In light of Jonah's reluctant preaching, the people of Nineveh finally faced what they all explicitly knew but dared not face; they realized they had been heading in the wrong direction. All the trouble and misery they were experiencing said as much. In light of Jonah's preaching they realized they were making choices that had inherently troubling consequences. They were adopting behaviors and life-styles that had inherently misery-making results. And in light of Jonah's preaching, they realized that they had to repent; that they had to change their minds, that they had to turn around. They realized that for the sake of the city, for the sake of the well-being of the city, they had to make a u-turn in the road. And they did it.

Centuries later, the apostle Peter, the Jewish follower of Jesus, would express God's heart to the largely Gentile churches scattered through the Roman Empire: the Lord "... is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). And the apostle Paul, when spreading the Gospel in the cities of the Roman Empire, would express God's heart to his colleague Timothy: "God our Savior ... desires all men and women to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). And so, the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Christ city of Nineveh; a Gentile city; a leading city of the Assyrian Empire; a leading city of the greatly feared Assyrian Empire; the hated enemy of Israel; at the preaching of a Jewish prophet, a reluctant Jewish prophet, repents. And God relents. And the people find mercy and grace. And the prophet is very angry. So angry he tells God he just wants to die (4:9).

Why angry? Why not rejoice? Because Jonah does not like what God feels for the city. And Jonah does not want to feel for the city what God feels for the city. Jonah wants the city, the very bad, very nasty, very immoral, unjust, corrupt, violence celebrating, war-making city destroyed, wiped off the face of the earth. Jonah does not want his and his people's enemy finding mercy and grace. Review the story-line. God calls the prophet to "arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for its wickedness has come up to Me" (1:1). As I have been pointing out, "wickedness" is only one meaning of the Hebrew word used in God's call. The primary meaning is "trouble." "Go to Nineveh and preach because its trouble has come up to Me." Jonah does not want to go and preach. It his vocation, his job...preach. To announce the life-giving Word of God whenever and wherever God tells him to do so. But it will not do it.

So he tries to flee from the presence of Yahweh. He discovers, what he had to know, that he cannot do it. No human being can do it. He ends up on the sea, heading in the wrong direction. And then in the sea, heading down, down, down. But the Living God, Yahweh is His name, wants the disobedient prophet to experience mercy and grace. So Yahweh goes after Jonah. On at sea. And in the sea. Yahweh sends a great fish, who rescues Jonah, heaving him up on the dry land.

Presumably, Jonah makes his way back to Jerusalem. There the Word of the Lord comes a second time. “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you” (3:1). That is, “go speak what I want you to speak.” The implication being only what I want you to speak. Nothing more and nothing less. So he goes. Reluctantly. But he goes. Fearing the worst. Not that the city will reject him and his preaching – which is what I fear. But fearing that the city will actually listen and respond. And find the mercy and grace he does not want his enemies to experience.

Finally he arrives in the place he does not want to go, to do what he does not want to do. The text calls Nineveh “an exceedingly great city.” Literally it is: “a great city to God.” Meaning, this city is important to God. “Great to God.” Much on His mind and heart. The text also says, “it took three days to go through it” (TNIV). Or, “a three days’ walk.” As other verses have it. It does not refer to how long it takes to traverse the city limits. The idiom “Three days” refers to the fact that a formal visit to an ancient Near East city involved a three-day protocol. OT scholar Donald Wiseman says the idiom refers to “the ancient oriental practice of hospitality whereby the first day is for arrival, the second day for the primary purpose of the visit and the third for return.” (Tyndale Bulletin 30 [1979] 38). Jonah enters Nineveh, “a major diplomatic center of the ancient world” (D. Stuart, 488) as an official “emissary,” (Wiseman), who enters, works, and leaves according to protocol. First day – Jonah tells the city who he is and why he has come. Second day – he would then go about his appointed task. Third day – he would leave bidding formal adieu.

But ... and this is what surprises Jonah ...and us: the miracle begins the first day! On the first day. He has only just begun to tell people why he came ... and they start repenting! On the first day he told them what he would be preaching the second day: “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (3:4). And on the first day, people begin to respond!

The text says, “The people believed in God ...” (3:5). In the other chapters of the Jonah story the term is the name Yahweh, God’s self-revelatory name. In Nineveh God is not yet known by the name. Only by the generic term “God,” Elohim. But they at least believe at that level and to that degree! They call a fast. On the first day! They repent so fully that they feel constrained to change clothes; to wear sackcloth; the middle-eastern clothing that says we are turning around, mourning, seeking. When the news reaches the king of Assyria, he too responds! The text says: “He arose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes” (3:6). Amazing! A powerful ruler witnesses a new “people-power” movement in his city and joins in! Because he is a

political opportunist and wants the people to think he is “one of” them? No. The king repents with the people because he too realizes, in light of Jonah’s reluctant preaching, that his own policies are causing the city trouble. He then issues a decree, calling for even deeper repentance. No food for a season. Dramatic enough. But also no water. Calling on all citizens to call on the Living God. As the sailors had done abroad the ship at sea. And, says the text, “God saw their deeds” (3:10). Their theology may not yet be all it needs to be. God is still the generic God, not yet Yahweh the Great I AM. But their actions speak volumes! The fact is, repentance is finally manifested in actions. God sees in the actions of the people genuine faith and true repentance. And, says the text, “God relented” (3:10). And the people rejoice. And the prophet is ticked.

This amazing story, this wonderful miracle, raises so many questions! Let me ask just three at this point.

Question one: Why did the city repent? “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Not all that impressive a sermon. Much too negative. Much too “in your face.” Right? Then why did the city repent when they heard that one-line word from the prophet?

1. Well, for one thing, some specific world-view dynamics at work. World-view dynamics we in our city do not share. The people of Nineveh, along with all the peoples all over the world at that time, lived with a much bigger world-view. That is, they had a transcendent understanding of reality. They believe there is more to reality than meets the unaided senses. Sometimes that “more” was terribly distorted, twisted, even oppressive. But they at least believed that there is a God, or, gods. So when a prophet came in the name of a God, they were inclined to give the prophet and his God a hearing. On the first day of the “three day visit,” they listened to what the visiting preacher had to say.

2. Another reason why the city repents; some specific historical dynamics at work. Which we in our city do not share. As we have noted in our other studies in Jonah, Nineveh had been experiencing a lot of misery – trouble as God called it. Famine. Then flood. Potential invasion by other powers; parts of the great Empire having already fallen. Losses on the battlefield and on the diplomatic front. Social unrest, even riots in the city streets. Most troubling, a strange confluence of natural phenomena: an earthquake; and a solar eclipse. (See Stuart, 489-491). Donald Wiseman, whom I quoted earlier, was an expert in things Assyrian. He translated a number of Assyrian documents which interpret frightening events taken to be signs or omens. The documents predict what sorts of things might be expected following, say, a solar eclipse. “The king will be deposed and killed and a worthless fellow seize the throne.” “The king will die, rain from heaven will flood the land, There will be famine.” “A deity will strike the King and fire consume the land.” “The city walls will be destroyed.” [TynB, 46] So scholars ask: was not the king in Nineveh “predisposed” to receive a message from a prophet sent to the city? (Stuart 492).

We in our time do not think in these ways. Yet are not many people asking fearfully “what is going on in the world?” In light of all we see and hear on the nightly news,

“what is going on?” What does all the social unrest mean? What does all the uncertainty and volatility of the financial markets mean? What does all the change in world weather patterns mean?

3. Another reason why Nineveh repents. The performative power of God’s Word. A factor we DO share with our cities. When God speaks, something happens. Always. When the Yahweh, the God Who spoke the universe into being, speaks, something happens. Always. “My word which goes forth from My mouth not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” – Isaiah 55:11. It is what keeps me going Sunday after Sunday. God’s Word makes things happen. Always. Not always immediately obvious. But always eventually, bearing fruit.

Even when the Word is not all that inviting! I have a friend, who was converted by reading one line from the book of Leviticus. He worked as an airline pilot. One night, during a troubling time in his life he took out the Gideon Bible providentially left in the drawer of the hotel night stand. He randomly opened to Leviticus 19:2, and read: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” He looks to that night as the beginning of his salvation. I have another friend, who was converted by reading one line from the apostle Paul. Again, reading a Gideon Bible in a hotel room. He opened it, randomly, to Galatians 6:7 – “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.” He looks to that text as the one that rescued him from disastrous trial he was walking. When God, when Yahweh, speaks, something happens.

4. One more reason the city repented at the preaching of Jonah. As I said two weeks ago, the word of warning was a word of grace. The fact that God even bothers to warn means things can change. Nineveh hears the word, “Yet forty days and the city will be overthrown,” as a word of grace! And it is. Full of grace. It means God is not finished with us! If judgment had been irrevocably decreed, God would not even bother to speak. God would just give what was deserved – destruction, as Jonah wanted. As we have put it on other occasions: Justice is God giving us what we deserve. Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve. Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve. The word of warning is shot through with mercy and grace. Which brings us to the second question I want to ask at this point in the story.

Question two: What was the warning? That is, what would have happened had the city not listened and acted? You are not going to like the answer. The city would have collapsed in its trouble. The city would have gotten what it deserved: its immorality and injustice and violence would have taken the city down. That is, the city would have experienced the full extent of the inherent consequences of its sinful choices. Yes, sometimes judgment comes in direct, overt form – outright overthrowing. But most of the time judgment comes in a far worse form. Far worse. God lets us have our way. In the Bible the wrath of God is not emotional outrage. In the Bible the wrath of God is not thunder and lightning. It is far worse than that. The wrath of God is God giving us over to the full consequences of the choices we make. It is awful. I would rather have thunderbolts and lightning. That would be so much less painful and agonizing. The

apostle Paul wrestles with this in his letter to the Romans, His letter to the capital city of the Empire of his day. Paul lists all kinds of expressions of human brokenness and the breakdown of human community. And many people think that it is because of these things that wrath comes. No, says Paul. These things are the wrath of God. God is letting us have our way. We are inheriting the consequences of our choices. Three times Paul uses the phrase “God gave them over.” No, Lord, please do not do it! Nineveh hears in Jonah’s preaching grace. God does not want to hand the city over to its own ways. God wants the city to find mercy and grace and a new lease on life.

“Forty days.” Not just a statistic. It is a symbol. Forty is the period of time for cleansing and purging. Israel is in the desert forty years for refining. The number 40 is a call to turn around; the number 40 says it is not too late! “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” “Overthrown.” The Hebrew word in Jonah’s one-line sermon has a number of meanings. Yes, ‘overthrow.’ But also ‘turning upside down,’ and ‘a reversal,’ and ‘a change,’ or, ‘a change of heart.’ As Douglas Stuart puts it: Jonah’s message “could mean both ‘In forty more days Nineveh will be overthrown,’ and ‘In forty more days Nineveh will have a change of heart.’” (489) The city, realizing the ambiguity in the word, takes the message to be an invitation to turn around! Which is why the miracle of repentance starts the first day of “the three day visit.” The Nineveh-its recognize that their misery is mostly their own doing. And they do not want the full consequences of their choices. Nor does God! Which is why God sends the messenger with the message!

Which brings us to the third question I want to ask at this point in the story. Question three: What is the message for our city? “We are a community following Jesus with His heart for the city.” So what message does His heart have for our city at this moment in history? Well, how much time do you have? I do not think the message is Jonah’s one-line proclamation! If God tells us to say it, we will. But I do not think He does. For one thing, since the coming of Jesus, the message is so much grander! And for another the cultural dynamics in our city are so very different from the cultural dynamics in Nineveh. Tell me about it! Jonah could walk into the city, present himself as a messenger of God, or a god, and get a hearing. Walk into our city and say, “God sent me”? I do not think so. We can only speak in our city if we are invited to speak. We can only speak when we are given the privilege to speak. And we have a lot of strikes against us.

St. Francis of Assisi was purported to have said: “Go preach the Gospel, and if necessary use words.” Good advise, as actions speak as loud as, if not louder than words. But as Duane Liftin, former President of Wheaton College has recently argued, St. Francis never said that. And more to the point, we cannot “preach” the Gospel without words.

[Christianity Today, May 2012]We can “live” the Gospel without words, and in so doing create a redemptive context in which the Gospel can be heard. But we cannot “preach” good news without good words. So, what are we to speak in our city? There are, of course, all kinds of one-line messages. Like John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” And like 2 Corinthians 5:19 – “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them ...”

I want to now offer you what I think I am to speak. If I were given the opportunity to speak to the city; if I were granted by the city the hospitality of the “three day visit.” If I were given 10 minutes on TV, for instance I would say ...well, I have written it out for you.

1. There is more to reality than meets the un-aided senses. More than can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched. More than can be detected by electron microscopes and stored on any super-computer.
2. At the center of all things is a Relationship (This is the most fundamental truth I know and believe).
3. This Relationship has always existed, and always will.
  - 3.1. This Relationship was there before the world came into being.
  - 3.2. This Relationship was there before we humans came on the scene.
4. This Relationship is between “Persons.” More specifically, between a Father and a Son. There was never a time when the Father was not a Father, and thus never a time when the Son was not a Son.
5. This Relationship itself is so alive (!) that it too is a “breathing,” a spirit, a Person, whom the Bible calls The Holy Spirit.
6. This Relationship at the center of all things is marked by:
  - Inter-dependence,
  - Mutual indwelling,
  - Deep intimacy,
  - Self-giving-love,
  - Creativity,
  - Joy.
7. This Relationship can use the pronouns “I,” “Me,” “Mine,” and also the pronouns “We,” “Us,” “Our.”
8. By this Relationship we were created.
9. For this Relationship we were created.
  - 9.1. We were brought into being to enjoy the Relationship’s “Us-ness.”
  - 9.2. We were brought into being to enter into and enjoy:
    - Inter-dependence,
    - Mutual indwelling,
    - Deep intimacy,
    - Self-giving-love,
    - Creativity,
    - Joy.
10. We humans (sadly!) turned our backs on this great fact, this great gift. This is what the Bible calls “sin,” and why even “good people” are “sinners.”
11. All of our misery is due to this turning away.
12. Because we have turned away from the only source of life there is, we live in:
  - Alienation,
  - Suspicion,
  - Blame,
  - Shame,
  - Inability to see clearly,
  - Bondage (addiction) to forces beneath our dignity,
  - Decay and death.

We were made for relationship; which is why broken relationships hurt more than broken bones.

13. The Living God, this Relationship, did not, and has not, turned away from us!
14. The Living God comes after us. The purpose of creation will not be thwarted by the willful rejection of mere mortals!
15. God's coming-after-us began right after the first humans turned away.
16. God's coming-after-us was expressed most intentionally (but not exclusively) in the long history of God's dealings with the family of Abraham and Sarah.
17. To Abraham and Sarah God made a promise that one day, one of their offspring would be the source of "blessing" to the whole world. "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed," God said. The promise was re-iterated and re-stated many times throughout this long history, this long story of relentless pursuit.
18. This story led, slowly but surely, to the Living God choosing to become the offspring promised to Abraham and Sarah! The story led inexorably to God coming to earth in person! More exactly, God the Son coming to earth in person.
19. When God came in person, God took on the name "Jesus," which is English for the Hebrew "Y'shua," meaning, "God is salvation," or more dynamically, "God-to-the-rescue."
20. The theological term for this amazing move of the Living God is "incarnation," the Creator of all things taking on human flesh and blood (Have you ever heard anything so utterly fantastic?).
21. In the incarnation, the Living God lives out for us, in our flesh and blood, 24/7, the life we were originally created and designed to live. In Jesus we see embodied those marks of the Relationship at the center of the universe:
  - Inter-dependence,
  - Mutual indwelling,
  - Deep intimacy,
  - Self-giving-love,
  - Creativity,
  - Joy.
22. In the incarnation, the Living God, amazingly and mercifully, takes on the totality of the human condition. That is, God makes our experience of life God's own!
  - God takes on human pain.
  - God takes on human sin.
  - God takes on the judgment human sin rightly deserves!
23. This taking-on is happening throughout the earthly days of the incarnation, but especially, and ultimately, in Jesus' death on a Roman cross.
24. More was happening at that cross than anyone at that moment could know. More than anyone since has been able to adequately capture and articulate.
25. In that death, the Relationship at the center of all things does everything that needs to be done in order for human beings to be brought back into the original purpose of creation.
26. On the cross Jesus cries out, "It is finished." What is finished?
  - 26.1. God's anger against human sin, and what it has done to humans and God's good creation, is resolved – fully expressed against God's Self!

- 26.2. God defeats the powers (human, supra-human, demonic) that hold human beings in bondage by death!
- 26.3. God rescues us from the powers
- 26.4. God the Judge acquits us – “Pardon in full!”
- 26.5. God reconciles us - God makes us God’s friends.
- 26.6. God removes all barriers to intimacy with God – God’s heart is wide open!
27. Three days after Jesus was crucified and laid in a borrowed tomb, He emerged on the other side of death alive! This is the event called “the resurrection.”
28. In this one man, death finally did not have the last word. It only had the second to the last word.
29. For anyone who enters into relationship with the Living Jesus, death will not have the last word either. The last word is “Life!”
30. Jesus is alive and is now the Head of a new human race.
31. Understandably, He now calls us to “turn around” (“repent” is the word usually used),
32. and “follow Me”
33. into a new quality of life.
34. This, understandably, involves learning a new way of life, a new life-style, with:
- new drives,
  - new appetites,
  - new priorities,
  - new motives,
  - new vision – “oh, now I see!”
  - new power, the power of the Holy Spirit, making it all happen!
35. Following the Man-Who-is-God, the God-Who-is-Man, leads to full participation in:
- God’s inter-dependence,
  - God’s mutual indwelling,
  - God’s deep intimacy,
  - God’s self-giving-love,
  - God’s creativity,
  - God’s joy.
36. This “participation” is what Jesus means by “the Kingdom of God,” which He calls us to “seek first.”
37. If that were not enough (!), He comes to live with us,
38. and to live in us (oh, can it really be?)
39. through the Holy Spirit, the breathing between the Father and the Son,
40. empowering us to live the Relationship’s quality of life.
41. Because of His death and resurrection, Jesus is now – already! – the Master of the universe. The actual term the Bible uses is “Lord,” meaning “Sovereign One,” or “Sovereign of sovereigns.”
42. His sovereign rule, or dominion, or administration, is presently ordinarily hidden; it is not obvious to everyone right now.
43. But the ordinarily-hidden is, surprisingly, made manifest in everyday, apparently insignificant, acts of self-giving, servant-love.

44. One day all of this will become visible to all. Jesus will “break-through” (the word is “apocalypse”) from behind the hidden-ness, and everyone will finally realize and confess that He is indeed Master. Given Who we discover Him to be, whom else would we want to have as Master?
45. Every day, the Relationship at the center of all things is working to bring about a fully re-created creation, where:  
 there will be no sin;  
 and, therefore, none of the consequences of sin;  
 and where we will finally, freely, fully, participate in:  
 God’s inter-dependence,  
 God’s mutual indwelling,  
 God’s deep intimacy,  
 God’s self-giving-love,  
 God’s creativity,  
 and God’s joy!
46. Nothing can ultimately thwart God, the Relationship, accomplishing this grand purpose.
47. Nothing.
48. There is more to reality than meets the un-aided senses.
49. “Come,” the Relationship says. Everyday, “Come home. Just turn around, and come home to your true home. The way home is open wide, and you are welcome to come all the way in.”

Make a list of 10 people you want to Lord to speak to in the coming weeks.

Pray.

