

Pastor Roy's Sermon from January 22, 2012

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who were the Ninevites? Who are these people that Jonah detests and wishes to avoid and why? The Assyrians lived roughly 700 years before the time of Jesus. They had a good civilization going with laws, judges, strong kings, good roads and farming—they were well organized. They spread their authority out over the lands of present day Iraq, Syria, Jordan and parts of Turkey and Iran. Israel was on the fringes. Now their practice was to come through with their armies and make an offer of protection in exchange for an annual large payment and tell them how things were going to be. If the local leaders wanted to remain independent, they could resist, but that often didn't work out very well. The Assyrians were persistent. When they came to make Israel part of their great system, Israel was not interested. So it did not go well for Northern Israel. In fact, it went quite badly. Northern Israel was conquered and brutally taken into captivity. The Israelites for the most part lost their identity—they were thrown into exile—peasants and slaves divided and spread in a foreign land.

Is there any question why Israelites hated and feared the Ninevites? Everything about them was foreign, detestable, and terrifying. Their religion was foreign as well as everything else about them. **The thought that they should be warned of God's judgment or, worse, be invited and welcomed into God's family—well, now that's going a bit too far. That was a violation of national security.** In that day you might have heard people say, “Enemies are enemies and prophets should stay out of politics.” Jonah's prophecy challenged Israel to the core of their existence and faith. It challenges us too.

As the prophecy goes, against his own wishes, Jonah proclaims that Nineveh is about to be overthrown. **Nothing is mentioned about a call to repent and that God's mercy is possible.** The tables are turned and *Nineveh* is about to be conquered by a greater power. Then the unexpected happens: They repent. The soulless pagans listen to the prophet's warning. Now here is a shock! *Israel* did not heed the prophets' warnings! How could pagans listen and be more obedient than God's chosen people? **And note, the king leads the way into repentance—everyone fast! Everyone repent! The King believes.** According to the historical books Kings and Chronicles, Northern Israel's kings rarely paid any heed to the prophets except when it helped them politically. They preferred to make up their own rules and ignore the prophets. No repentance, no fasting.

The natural reaction to this story in Israel would be shock—a king that listens to a prophet? Ha! What a joke! Unimaginable! Hmmm. Wait, what would it be like if a king or even the people would take seriously God's call to justice and faithfulness! Hmmm.

But this is not the end of the story. The further unexpected happens: God turns. No, there will be no punishment now. The judgment is now **blessing** rather than **curse** because they are willing to follow. Nineveh is released from the threat of calamity. **Yet, (listen to this) Israel still lives under judgment for not listening and resisting Yahweh's rule. Israel is more resistant to following God than the pagans.**

Many lessons to learn from Jonah. I believe it was a perfect parable for Israel. Now, some say it actually happened, others say it was originally told as a parable to shock Israel into thinking and repenting. **The power of the word about Jonah is not in whether it actually happened 2800 years ago—no, the power of the story is that Jonah was God's word to Israel and it is God's word to us today.** It makes us ask questions. What does it mean to be the people of God? Does it mean that God

likes us and doesn't like the people who think and believe differently? Could it be that other nations and faiths aren't *so* different from ours? Are other people more open to following God than we are? Perhaps the most important challenge of Jonah is that we need to listen to God working in our community and world and join in the work. It's amazing how much God is at work before we even get started.

Jonah is much like the parable of the Good Samaritan—the enemy who becomes the faithful example. Perhaps the story of Jonah gave Jesus the idea for the story of the Good Samaritan. God's mercy is downright shocking and if we're honest, it leaves us feeling put out, at times—and humbled when it turns out that we need mercy as much as the next person. Jonah forces us to consider that we have much in common even with our enemy and the stranger is only a friend in disguise—certainly not any worse than we are.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus begins calling his disciples. They don't know to what he is calling them. But they follow. They listen. They learn. They turn the world upside-down when they follow God who is love, and mercy, and faithfulness.

Jesus is calling us today to keep sharing in every way possible, this love and mercy, and faithfulness. Welcome the stranger, the poor, the strong, and the weak. Friend and foe. Let us question our assumptions about who is ok and who is not ok. Our judgments are not automatically God's judgments. Let us expect to meet a God whose mercy is unimaginable—yes, shocking and disturbing at times when we see it granted to others and to ourselves. The power of God's love sets us free to live and love.

So Jesus who is prepared to die for everything that he lived for, calls disciples to follow him. Not to be gleeful prophets of doom, not even to be heroes, or to prove ourselves, or to be strong or good, or even faithful all of the time—Jesus calls us to follow where he leads. He leads not from a throne of certainty and power over our enemies, but he leads from the cross of suffering love. Who has the courage to follow into a life of certain uncertainty? Who is willing to follow the one whose strength is love rather than domination or self-righteousness? Jonah and Jesus call us to have open hands leading to true life rather than closed fists leading to certainty and death. Jonah and Jesus both lead us through death (belly of the whale or the belly of the tomb) into life. We must die to our impulses and inclinations and come alive to love. From death to life. God is at work among us. Thanks be to God.