

Overcoming and Trusting
Jonah 3:10-4:11

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

“Forty days more, and Hanover shall be overthrown” “Forty days more, and Hanover shall be overthrown.” “Forty days more, and Hanover shall be overthrown.” (((((I will say this over and over again walking down the middle aisle until I reach the back pew then I will sit down.))))))

So was that a good sermon? Did it motivate you? Did it move you to action? Does it inspire you to repent and turn to God? Does it fill you with the mercy of God? Eight words is all Jonah’s sermon was. Even though an eight worded sermon has got to be the shortest sermon on record in the Bible, more than 120,000 men and women heard the message, repented and were saved. That is amazing! That is the miracle of the book of Jonah and he gives us so much to learn from.

To bad most people only know Jonah as the guy that got swallowed by the whale. That is one of those great Bible stories we learned as a kid and never got past it. The imagery of a man being saved by God through the belly of a whale is engrained in most Christians that ever went to Sunday school or Vacation Bible School. But the problem is there is so much more to the story of Jonah – and we miss that lesson if we don’t examine the entire story of Jonah.

In chapter one a prophet of God named Jonah son of Amittai was called by God to go to Nineveh and preach against it for its evil had become great. Jonah being a man of God and a prophet who spoke the word of God, knew the importance of this message and the seriousness of God. However Jonah was also human, he knew the reputation of Nineveh. Nineveh was a city of the Assyrian Empire located on the east bank of the Tigris River where Mosul, in Northern Iraq is today. Hopefully by now when I mention the Assyrians you know why that would strike fear into any Jewish prophet. Even today that conflict between the two areas is widely known. A Jew was not welcome into an Assyrian city such as Nineveh. The Assyrians had conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel and defeated it, destroying and burning, ransacking and occupying the homes, farms, markets and cities of the Hebrew people. So you can imagine the hatred and fear Jonah would have to be told by God to go to Nineveh and proclaim their destruction. So he goes down to the coast and sets sail for the farthest point any trade ship would go in the furthest direction, Tarshish, most likely a Phoenician colony in Spain.

And you know this part of the story. On the boat the waves start getting rough, the storms come up and the wind blows. The sailors are frightened and asking why God is mad at them. Jonah admits that it is he that has turned God's anger, so he tells them to cast him overboard. And after some persuading they do. Jonah is tossed over board the ship going to Tarshish is saved. And Jonah floating in the water about to drown is swallowed up in a large fish, and transported by God's intervention, back across the Mediterranean and up the River Tigris and is spit out on the shores of the great city Nineveh.

And now by chapter three, Jonah is standing before the city of Nineveh, and the Word of God comes to him a second time, to go and preach the message that God had given him. So he begins walking into the city one days' journey preaching that simple 8 word message – Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

And the truly amazing miracle is what happens in the few verses before our reading for today. All the people of Nineveh believe this stranger, this 8 worded message, this Jewish preacher, and they repent, from the King down to the lowest, dirtiest street person. They all change their ways, putting on the sackcloth that itches and irritates as a sign of their repentance and their willingness to change, putting ashes on their heads and bodies, sitting in it as a sign of distress and woe. And they all, everyone of them repent. And we remember the miracle of the fish and are troubled by one man being saved and how can that be while living in a fish, and we forget this part so easily, that over 120,000 people hear a short sermon and repent turning to God seeking mercy.

Then we come to our reading for today, God sees that the people have repented and so he is merciful, sparing them from their destruction. And Jonah sulks, he gets angry, who goes into a fit. That is why I fled when you first asked me to preach to these people, because I know you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, that you would relent from your punishment. Jonah doesn't admit that he might have been scared of such a people or risking looking like a fool, instead he blames God for doing the very thing he knew God is all about, mercy and love. How dare he! And so Jonah goes out of the city to sulk on the side of the road in the heat of the day.

While sitting there God comes to teach him a lesson about grace, God brings about a bush to grow up over night and give him shade and then allows it to be taken away the next day. Jonah is angry that his shade is gone and God reminds him that he should be as concerned about the people, because he had now control over the plant and yet he puts all his rage into its death, why not be as concerned about the possible punishment and death of

so many people that he did have some help in changing. And there the story ends leaving us to learn our lesson and what the message of this four chapter short book means.

Now I could just preach the same eight words to you that Jonah did and hope that you do indeed feel motivated and filled with God's mercy. But I think this short story has many other things to teach us also.

We learn in the person of Jonah, that people are reluctant to do God's work. When called by God to be his people and sent forth with a message we find ourselves many times like Jonah, reluctant. To go out there into Hanover and tell people about God, that is difficult. Perhaps it is easier to go to other places, do other things, keep ourselves so busy we don't have time to think about doing what God would have us be doing. We can come up with many excuses, we can blame others and say we can't do it, shouldn't do it, not good enough, not prepared enough, there is no hope. But all those excuses are simply signs of our reluctance. We are God's people now and everywhere we go. We are to go with the Word of God before us sharing it in how we do business, how we greet one another, how we care for each other, how we support each other.

Another point that needs to be made is that we are sent to Nineveh, the work is not easy, there are obstacles, there are problems, even here in Hanover. There are drugs, crime, unemployment, homeless, hunger, broken relationships, sickness and death things that don't make doing God's work easy. Even here at Church we have our issues, budget, a large building with many needs, not enough volunteers, need for more participation, no Church is perfect. It is easy to be like Jonah and think that I don't want to deal with it, let's go somewhere else – it is bound to be easier there, but the only problem is no matter where you go you will end up faced with the same challenges God is putting before you now. If God is calling us, we are to go and not limit the work God would have us being doing.

And lastly we have to remember that even though we may be reluctant in doing what God would have us do, and the ministry field might be tough, we also must remember that with God all things are possible. Jonah found that he could not get away from God. By a miracle he is brought back to preach. The city of Nineveh, even though exceeding large and filled with evil, by a miracle all repent and are saved. God provides us with so much if we just rely on him and follow his will. May we learn from Jonah to seek the Lord's will here in this church, in our lives, in each day of our life, to do his work, to see all places, times, and situations as instances for God's word to be shared and to most importantly expect all things with God. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.
AMEN.