

Jonah 3:1-5

“Still Aint Right”

I have preached to y’all before that, “We aint right.” Right? Y’all have heard me say that before? “We aint right.” Every one of y’all are sinners. (pause) Right? (pause) Everybody here knows that I am right; right? (pause) Right. So we are all sinners. Right? (pause) Right. Okay. It is with that epiphany in mind I bring to you this morning a part of the story of Jonah.

To understand Jonah I need to ask y’all this. By a show of hands, how many of y’all remember what it was like to have a toddler at home? (pause) How many of y’all remember what it was like to have a willful toddler when they were going through their terrible twos? (pause) How many of y’all have one of those at home right now? (pause) I do. Brock is at that age where he cannot say a ton of words yet, but he understands plenty. And sometimes Brock does not want to do what he is told to do. Sometimes, we will call out, “Brock. It’s time to eat,” and Brock will pretend he cannot hear us. (pause) Brock is not the only one who tries to pull that trick. (pause) By a show of hands, how many of y’all have kids who try to play that game? (pause) You hear that kids. We’re on to ya. We’ll be outside walking around the parking lot in front of the Hut while Evan and Audrey ride their bikes. “Hey Brock, let’s head on back to the house.” And what does he do? He runs for those two round concrete wheels we’ve got laying on the ground by the basketball goal. The exact opposite direction we told Brock to go. So you know what we gotta do? (pause) Karen or I have to run over after him, and bring him home. (pause) Do you know what happens next? The very next chance he gets he is right back over at those big stone wheels. That is Jonah!

Jonah had been told to go to the city of Nineveh and cry against it because of their great wickedness. Jonah did not want to go. Do you know how I know Jonah did not want to go? Jonah ran off to Joppa, and got on a boat to go to Tarshish. I don’t know where Tarshish was, but I do know Tarshish was not on the way to Nineveh. The Bible says Tarshish was in the opposite direction from Nineveh (Jonah 1:3). “Brock, let’s go home,” and off he runs to those concrete wheels. “Jonah, go to Nineveh,” and off he runs off to Joppa. It’s the same thing. It is the same behavior. So what is God gonna do? (pause) God is gonna do the same thing Karen and I do. God has to go after Jonah. God goes by way of a terrible storm. The sailors on the ship Jonah had chartered were terrified. They were so terrified they finally did what Jonah told them to do and they threw Jonah into the sea. Then the storm quits, but Jonah is swallowed up by a big fish. That poor fish had to put up with Jonah’s bad attitude all the way back to dry land where the fish spat Jonah out. Jonah had been saved from a storm at sea. Jonah had been saved by and from a big fish. Jonah had been saved; but here’s the thing. Even though Jonah had been saved Jonah still wasn’t right. (x2) Just because Jonah had been saved it did not mean Jonah was in a right relationship with God. It just meant God put Jonah back on the right path. Jonah still had to walk it.

So there Jonah is. Jonah has been fetched by God. Jonah has been spat out on the beach by a big stinky fish. The call comes again from God, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you” (Jonah 3:1). Now Jonah has a choice. Will he do what God asks, or will he run away again? Church, what does Jonah do? (pause) Right. Jonah does what God asks. Is Jonah happy about it? (pause) The Bible is not specific, but judging from the way Jonah delivers God’s message it seems to me Jonah is not happy about being there and delivering God’s message. Depending on when in history the story of Jonah takes place Jonah could have not liked the Ninevites because Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria, and Israel and Judah had to pay tribute money to Assyria— which meant taxes – ***A LOT of taxes***. Anybody here looking forward to tax season? (pause) Anybody excited about paying taxes this year? (pause) No? Well imagine having to pay extra taxes so another country would not come into your land with a terrible army to invade?

That might make you pretty resentful, angry and bitter. Jonah was certainly all of those things. When Jonah delivers God's message to Nineveh, Jonah is not proclaiming a message of grace and forgiveness. Jonah is delivering a proclamation like a police officer dropping off a foreclosure notice, or delivering a subpoena to someone who is about to be prosecuted. There's no joy in this statement. "In forty days God is going to overthrow this city (Jonah 3:4)! But here is the crazy thing about the Hebrew for this word overthrow. It is only used one other time in the Old Testament to describe what God is going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. However, the word is used differently here. In this verse the word could mean "turned over." The funny thing is that is exactly what happens. The city, from the poorest pauper to the king covers themselves in sack cloth and ashes and cries out to God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob not to destroy their city. The Assyrians had their own [g]ods. They might not have known about The Lord God Almighty, and yet they cried out to Jonah's God to have mercy on them. It is clear from Jonah's attitude in chapter four Jonah thought God was going to destroy the city. However, what happened is the city of Nineveh was overturned. They were not destroyed by fire. Nineveh was overturned by repentance; by turning back to God.

Take this to heart my sisters and brothers. Just because we have been chased down by God through God's Prevenient grace, and just because we have been saved by Justifying grace offered freely through the blood of Jesus Christ it does not mean we are in a right relationship with God. All that means is that our past sins, mistakes and failures to be obedient have been forgiven. We still aint right. What's more, we are Wesley-Armenians. We do not believe in once saved always saved. We have a job to do. We have a role to play. It is not enough to be like my willful, terrible-twoing little boy who only does what he is told when we make him. God does not want to be with us in that kind of relationship. That is why Justification is not enough. Yes, we have been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, but thanks to free will there is nothing which prevents us from going right back to making the same mistakes all over again. When the fish spat Jonah out on the shore Jonah could have run north to Asia Minor, or south into Egypt. Jonah may have decided to go on to Nineveh, but it does not mean he was right with God. It just means Jonah did what Jonah was told.

However, the people of Nineveh did a lot more than they were told. They repented. They turned back to God. They did not just pay God lip service by say, "Oh yeah, yeah. I hear ya God," and then go back to however they were sinning. Instead they tore their clothes – which was a very expensive thing to do. They covered themselves in ashes, and they cried out to God. I am not sure God wants us to tear up our stuff and sit in the dirt all day, but I do think God wants us to look for new ways to seek God. What are we doing to seek God today? What are we doing to grow in our relationship with God? I hate to break it to you folks, but just because you went through confirmation when you were 12 or 13 it does not mean you are right in your relationship with God now. Our relationship with God is a lot like our relationship with our spouse, or our children. It has to be worked at every day. Brothers and sisters did you know the season of Lent is coming up quick? The whole point of that season is to prepare our hearts for the resurrection of the King. We are to be ready for the Holy Spirit and to celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death. How will we prepare our hearts for Christ this year? What would it look like if instead of giving something up for Lent this year we decided we were going to spend the 40 days of Lent doing one new thing to help us grow closer to God; as a community, as a church, as a family, as individuals? What would it look like to actively look for ways to grow closer to God for no better reason than because we recognize we aint right with God yet?

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.