

May 21, 2017

Lesson 12: Jonah 3 and Nahum 1-3

God's Love for Nineveh

Context:

The lesson this week picks up after Jonah is spat out from the large fish. After a cry for deliverance, Jonah has gotten his way and found himself freed from the fish's belly. But God has not forgotten Jonah in the whole process. And for a second time, God calls for Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians. There he is to preach a proclamation that God has given them.

By ancient standards, Nineveh was probably a fortified city that had a population in the thousands. To go into such cities would take a bit to travel around as everything was done on foot and people's homes were on top of each other as they formed communities. It would have also made speaking a great deal as you would have to travel from place to place to spread the word. Jonah would have had quite the task in front of him to stand and proclaim God's word to that many people.

The Assyrians themselves were also not the friendliest people. I remember my history or ancient civilization classes mentioning them as some of the most ruthless and cunning ancient groups. They were known for subjecting entire empires and even enslaving multiple nations to serve them. After the Babylonian exile, this was the group that had become Israel's greatest enemy. They were a strong major force and they would have not been the people you wanted to cross or be on their bad list.

But these are the people to whom Jonah is to go and preach and lead to repentance. As he goes into the city though, something strange happens. The people listen to him. They begin fasts and tear their clothes to mourn. They become a repentant people and hope that God will not destroy them. Even the great king calls for the city to turn around and go into a period of introspection and mourning. And God decides not to destroy them after seeing that they have ceased their bad behavior.

Application:

The Assyrians sound like a harsh and scary people. A people who were so scary that Jonah himself ran from God so that he wouldn't have to speak to them. One can only imagine the trepidation he felt in going to the capital city and proclaiming the message he had to deliver. Would they listen? Would he become a victim of their brutality and violence? Would Jonah die as a result of doing what God called him to do?

What we learn in this story is that you never know the heart of people you do not know. You may have some assumptions based on previous experiences or some stereotypes that prove true. But until you engage with people you will never know what they truly value or what is at the center of their hearts.

As I read this scripture passage, I could not help but think of how Jonah exhibited for us what it means not only to listen to God's call, but to also be a lifelong learner. Lifelong learners are people who see that there are different things to discover along their journey. While there of course are scary parts of the journey, they still find that these things can give them a new perspective on the world and more information about others around them. But it also means that we be vulnerable and acknowledge we might not know everything. Openness is a scary place sometimes because it will break down walls

that we have clearly established.

We all have our Assyrians; people that we may look at and be deeply afraid. Some might be of a different denomination, a different religion, a different race, a different nationality, and the list goes on and on. The easy thing to do is avoid them, to see if you can set up enough walls to separate yourselves from them. We form our communities or tribes and may think that is the best way to handle our differences. But is that really how Christ would have us be in the world?

Recently I read a book called “Disunity in Christ,” by Christian Cleveland for my ordination class. In it she talked about how Christians categorize people. We have “Right Christian” and “Wrong Christian.” Of course, the “Right Christian” does and believes in certain things that are contrary to “Wrong Christian.” Her main point was that in doing so we break the body of Christ and do not see the image of God even in our neighbor. In my ordination class, we discussed how we’ve seen this dualistic thinking in our personal lives and in the contexts we serve. As I prepared my discussion answers, I went through life and thought of all the different people I have met that at times either I myself or others taught me to label as “Wrong Christian,” or just “Wrong Person.” They may have been people with certain reputations, certain backgrounds, or people who just didn’t fit my boxes of normal. Over time I would get to know people and be surprised by all we had in common instead of all our differences. But if I had stuck to first impressions or not gotten to know them, then I am not sure a relationship would have ever blossomed.

Who are the Assyrians in your world? The people who you think are a certain way and so you avoid or berate them at all costs. Now think of ways that you might engage with them, not to argue or defend your points, but to get to know them and what motivates them. Listen to stories about their passions, their families, their friends, and about the experiences that form them. If they live abroad, do your research about their country or their religion and discover ways that you might be able to engage with these people to learn more about them. In the midst of it you may even feel the Holy Spirit nudging you to revisit your thoughts and see that God has brought you together so that Kingdom work can be done. Kingdom work that involves tearing down walls, building bridges, and living so that our children and grandchildren can live in a place where God’s will may be done.

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