

"Then the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.'" God is now telling Jonah for the second time to go to Nineveh. And unlike the first time when Jonah tried to get out of it, when he tried to come up with any excuse he could think of, when he even thought that he was doing the right thing by running away, this time is different. This time Jonah listens. This time Jonah does what God wants him to do. There's no complaint. There's no excuses. There's no trying to get out of it. Jonah simply goes as the Lord commands him. And so as we follow Jonah throughout this chapter, Christians, the question that we want to ask ourselves this evening is this: do we listen to the Lord the way that Jonah did? Do we pay attention when God is speaking to us? Or to put a little bit differently, do we take God seriously when he tells us something? Do we take him seriously so that we're not making excuses or trying to get out of it, but simply doing what God would have us do?

Because that's what we find Jonah doing here in our reading. Jonah is going, just as the Lord commands him to go, to Nineveh. And it says that when he got to Nineveh that Nineveh was an "exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breath." Now, that could mean that it was three days by foot from one gate to another, all the way across the city. It could mean that it was three days throughout all of the streets of the city. It could even mean that it was talking about that region that the city was in and that was what was three days across, kind of like a ZIP code or something like that. That ultimately doesn't matter. What does matter here is that it is a huge area that Jonah is told to go through, a gigantic piece of land with hundreds of thousands of people living in it. And God tells him: "Go to this region, go to this city, and proclaim this message to all of them." Now, we would say, that seems impossible! How could one man do all of that? Well, maybe, maybe if he had enough time to do it. Maybe if Jonah had all the time in the world, he could get to all those people eventually. But Jonah doesn't have all the time in the world. He's got forty days and then the city will be destroyed. What God is asking him to do seems humanly impossible. It seems like there's no way that one man could do all of these things.

And it would be real easy in that situation to not take God very seriously, wouldn't it? We would say, "God, this is crazy! There's no way I can do this. There's no way I, all by myself, could go to all of these people in so short of a time. What you are asking me to do is impossible! So maybe, I just don't have to do it at all. Maybe you don't really mean what you say." But that's not what Jonah does. Jonah is not worried about how impossible it seems. He's not worried about how big the task is at hand. Jonah listens to the Lord. He takes him seriously when he commands him to go to Nineveh. And he goes throughout the city proclaiming the message he has been sent to proclaim.

And so, Christians, maybe the first question that we have to ask ourselves here is do we take God seriously, especially when he commands us to do something which seems impossible? Telling us to turn away from something, telling us to stop doing something, telling us to go do something, whatever it may be. If it seems hard or impossible to us, do we listen to that? Do we listen to what God wants us to do and follow after him, even if we're not really sure how it's going to work out? Because that's the place where Jonah found himself, not really sure how this was all going to go down, but at the very least he knew that he had a message to proclaim. Do we do the same?

But the message that Jonah has been sent to proclaim is a very simple one, isn't it? "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown." It's a simple one, because it's a very basic message of repentance. Stop doing what you're doing, Nineveh. Turn away from your sins. Turn back towards the living God, and God will not destroy the city. Keep going the way you're going, he says, and in forty days you won't be here anymore. He's not worried about how difficult it is to get the message to everybody. He simply proclaims that message, because he takes God seriously when he tells him his Word.

But now a miraculous thing happens. Jonah is not even a third of the way into the city, a single day's journey, proclaiming to everyone he's found, which probably wasn't all that many. And yet the message he has been sent to proclaim comes to everybody. Even the king of Nineveh has heard the message and the preaching of Jonah. Repent before the city is destroyed! And everyone in the whole city, hundreds and thousands of people, now turn away from their sins and turn towards the living God. One man's preaching has brought this entire, great city to turn towards the Lord. Was that Jonah that did that? Was it Jonah's work, barely getting into the city, that convinced all of them? No. It was God. God used the preaching of Jonah to bring Nineveh to repentance. God used Jonah to bring his message to all of them and caused that message to go throughout the whole city, so that all of them from the very highest to the very lowest now sit in ashes and fast from food and put on sackcloth--scratchy cloth that doesn't feel very good to wear--all for the purpose of repenting of their sins. It shows just how seriously they are taking the Word of the Lord. They know that God means it when he says he's going to destroy them. And so they call out to him and say: "Spare us, O Lord, and turn away from your burning anger so that we may not be destroyed." They have all listened to what God has to say. They have taken him very seriously in his Word.

And for that reason, God sees their repentance, and he turns away from his anger. He does not do what he said he would do. Not that he wasn't serious. He was deadly serious when he said he would destroy them. But he is also very serious about his mercy, because he does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he turn from his wicked way and live. We should take God's threats seriously, just as Nineveh did. But we should also take his promises just as seriously, because God means what he says.

So Christians, I ask you, do you take God's Word seriously? Do you listen to what he has to say? And when he tells you to do something, do you do it, or do you come up with excuses as to why you don't have to? Let me use some examples. When God says to you very clearly something like "love your neighbor," do you take that seriously? Do you take it seriously that God wants you to love those around you as much as you love yourself and as much as you love him? Or do you say, "I have all kinds of good reasons why I don't have to love that person. I remember all of the things that they've done to me. So I don't need to take God seriously when he says this." Do you listen to what he has to say? Or when he says to you "abide in my Word," do you take that seriously? Do you spend time in the Bible? Do you spend time in church, doing these things regularly? Or do you say, "I have more important things to do. I've got other things I've got to take care of. I'll get to that other stuff later." Do you take God seriously? Or when the Lord says to you, "those who do the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God, do you take that seriously? Do you take it seriously that God says that those who persist in their sins will not enter heaven? Or do you say, "Well, my sins aren't really that bad. They aren't really that big.

They're not going to keep me away from God." Do you take God seriously? Of course, you might say, "But we're all sinners! We all stumble and fall. We're all going to fail." And that's true. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God and need his forgiveness. But do you use the fact that you are a sinner as an excuse to not listen to what God has to say? Do you take what God says seriously?

Because consider this also, Christians, what Jesus says in Luke chapter 11: "When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, 'This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. . . . The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.'" So in the resurrection, Christians, will the men of Nineveh stand up and condemn you? Because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. But think about how little they had to go on. They didn't have the knowledge of God. They didn't have the Bible. All they had was one man preaching one very basic message of repentance. And yet they turned in full repentance towards the Lord, having so little, with all of their heart and soul. So why then do we resist, knowing so much more about the Lord? Why then do we fight back and not want to do what the Lord says, we who know Jesus Christ in his fullness? Why do we want to persist in our sins?

Because Christians, repentance is not just a feeling. It's not just something I feel on Sunday morning when I'm confessing my sins, makes me feel a little bit bad and then I just sort of forget about it. Repentance is a God-given change of life. It is turning away from our sins by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we no longer want to be in them, so that we want to turn away from them entirely because we are now in God. God has given us his Son Jesus Christ to forgive us and to make us into something completely new, so that we are able to follow after him, so that we can repent and turn towards him and live. So Christians, "if we confess our sins," as John tells us, "God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." To bring us not only to himself to be with him, but to transform us and to make us new.

So let us turn away from our sins, Christians. Let us turn away from the things which keep us away from God. To fight back against those sins which are still within us. Because God has forgiven us through Jesus Christ. Take God seriously when he threatens against sin. He means what he says. But also take him seriously when he forgives you your sins through Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us out of darkness into your marvelous light. We pray that you would strengthen us to always turn towards you, so that we may repent of our sins daily and be built up in true faith unto life everlasting by the forgiveness of your Son and through the working of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.