

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This morning's Old Testament lesson tells us of God's second call to Jonah and his less than enthusiastic response. However, the story of Jonah is a whole piece and needs to be told from beginning to end.

The story of Jonah is a moral tale, much like Aesop's fables, and is designed to teach us something about ourselves. However, some background, is necessary for us as a modern audience so we understand the conflict within Jonah's heart and soul.

God's instruction in both chapter one verse one and chapter three verse one is, "Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city." To an Israelite like Jonah, this would be equivalent to ordering us today to, "Go to an IS camp in Syria." Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and ruled over the southern kingdom of Judah for almost one hundred years. Assyria was more than an enemy; it was a brutal occupying force that forever changed Israel's fortunes. Jonah is called out by God to go and prophesy to the enemy. To really understand this story, we must look through Jonah's eyes; we need to think of how we would feel in the same situation. I cannot imagine a worse position! Jonah is told to go into the enemy city and announce God's judgment. Just think about how difficult we often find it to talk to our friends about God and our faith, let alone people whom we don't really like or find it difficult to get along with! Little wonder Jonah ran!

So the book of Jonah tells the story of this prophet's flight, how God stopped him and turned him around. But it is much more than the story of a man and a great fish. Jonah's story is an overwhelming example of God's mercy and grace. No one deserved God's favour less than the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Jonah knew this. But he knew that God would forgive and bless them if they would turn from their sin and worship him. Jonah also knew the power of God's message, that even through his own weak preaching, they would respond and be spared God's judgement. But Jonah hated the Assyrians, and he wanted vengeance, not mercy. So he ran. Jonah leaves town on the first boat out. We all know that Jonah ends up in the fish, and it is only here that Jonah finally does something. He calls out to God! Eventually, Jonah obeyed God and preached in the streets in Nineveh, and the people repented and were delivered from judgement.

Have you ever been in a situation when you really needed a second chance? If you were dealing with someone who shows kindness they might have given you that second chance. How about the other way around ... have you ever been in the position where someone needed a second chance from you? It is much easier to grant a second chance to someone else when you yourself have been given a second chance. But are we sometimes like Jonah, so caught up with our own feelings of hurt that we won't give someone a second chance? Are we sometimes like the servant in Matthew chapter eighteen, who having been forgiven a massive debt by his master, then refused to forgive the much smaller debt of a fellow servant?

What I really love about this story is that it tells us so clearly that our God is a God of second chances and we all need second chances; when Adam & Eve blew it in the garden of Eden, which affected all humanity, God had a backup plan that would give us the second chance to enjoy him for eternity ... his name is Jesus! Paul discovered what it was like getting a second chance and giving someone named John Mark a second chance! Paul had previously been a murderer; and John Mark had been a quitter! Both got second chances!

Don't we really appreciate if we are pulled over by the police for speeding and then they say, "well, I'll let you go this time, just don't let it happen again" ...oh that marvellous feeling of second chances! A judge in court will often let a person off easy if it is their first offense, recognizing that everyone should have a second chance if it was just a mistake!

However, second chances have to be accepted to be good! Just like the Ninevites in verse eight where the King proclaimed, "yea, let them turn everyone from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands,"; when God gives us a second chance to follow his will and use the gifts he has given us to build his kingdom, we have to say yes and that may include changing our ways just like the Ninevites.

As we read Jonah, we see the full picture of God's love and compassion and realise that no one is beyond redemption. A rebellious Jonah found God's grace and a second chance ... so did a wicked generation of Ninevites! When the call came the second time, Jonah obeyed, when the Ninevites heard the message that God was going to give them a second chance to be saved they quickly responded. The gospel is for all who will repent and believe.

So what are the lessons for us now? Well we can begin praying for those who seem to be farthest from the kingdom, and look for ways to tell them about God. That includes those people to whom we find it really difficult to give a second chance; people who perhaps have bullied us in the office or the playground; those who have caused us harm through gossip; or those who have taken delight in undermining our self-confidence. We can also learn from the story of this reluctant prophet and determine to obey God, doing whatever he asks and going wherever he leads.

Let us pray; Father in heaven we pray that you will strengthen us as we seek to do your will and to follow where you lead. Help us to reflect the love you give to us as we give others a second chance. In Jesus' name, Amen.