

Now. Listen to a story from the word of God. And listen to God's word for you.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and them they are bad and need to change and become good. Now. Prophets are people who come so close to God, and God comes so close to them, that they know what God is telling them to do. Then they go do it. Jonah turned and when the other way. He found a ship going to Tarshish in Spain. It was as far from Ninevah as you could go. Suddenly a storm broke out. The sailors were afraid so each of them prayed to their own god. The threw everything they were carrying into the sea to make the boat lighter. Now. A prophet is someone who helps people discover what is best to do. They went to look for Jonah. Do you know where he was? He was asleep in the bottom of the boat. The captain found him and commanded him to call on his God to save them. All Jonah did was climb up on the deck of the boat. Now. The crew were more afraid. They decided to cast lots to see who God was angry at. They wanted to throw that person overboard to get rid of him. Now. A prophet is someone who can speak for the One True God, but still Jonah did not speak. The sailors asked him who he was. He told them he worshipped God, the One who made the sea and the dry land. Then the sailors were afraid. They knew that he was trying to flee from God. The sea grew even more troubled, so Jonah said, "Throw me in and the storm will stop." So they threw him in. All was suddenly quiet. The sea was calm. Now. A prophet is someone who brings people close to God by what they say and do. Jonah said nothing but when the sea grew calm the sailors all fell down and worshipped the true God. Now. A prophet is someone who is close to God and a false prophet is very far from God. When Jonah was thrown into the water he was neither close nor far from God. He was sinking. As he sank a big fish swam up and swallowed him. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Jonah began to pray and the fish began to feel very strange. It grew sicker and sicker. Finally it swam to shore and vomited Jonah onto the dry land. Now. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Arise, go to Ninevah, that great city, and tell the people they are bad and that they need to change and become good. This time Jonah went to Ninevah. He cried out to the people of Ninevah that they were bad and that God commanded them to be good. God said they would be destroyed if they did not. Now. A prophet is someone who is overjoyed when people who are bad become good. The people of Ninevah listened to God's call and they turned and became good. All went about wearing sackcloth and ashes to show how sorry they were. Even the king and queen were sorry and became good. The creatures in the field were sorry too, and they also became good. God did not destroy that great city. This made Jonah angry. He wanted God to destroy the city. These people were not even the people of God! He went outside the city and sat on a hill and sulked. He wanted to get his way. God said: "Why are you angry?" God caused a plant to grow and give Jonah shade as he sat on the hill in the sun. Then one night God sent a worm to attack the plant. It withered away and died. When the sun rose a sultry east wind came, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head, so that he was faint. He grew angry about the death of the plant. "Why are you angry about the plant?" God asked. Jonah said, "I am angry – angry enough to die." He still thought he might get his way. God said, "You pity the plant but you did

nothing for it. You did not cause it to grow. You did not care for it. Should I not pity Ninevah, that great city where there are more than 120,000 people, and all their cattle?

Now. I wonder what part of the story you like best? I wonder what part of the story is the most important part? I wonder where you are in the story? What part of the story is about you? I wonder how you would finish this story?

From Jonah's story we've learned a lot of lessons. Each week this month we've walked through this story with Jonah and with God. In this short and sometimes funny and improbable story we're able to see and understand more about God. Scripture is not just ancient words, or stories that have been taught to us with flannel board cutouts, or something we use to enforce our beliefs. Scripture is meant to teach us, and to engage us, and to challenge us. In scripture we are meant to find God and find ourselves. In this telling of Jonah ~ the whole story albeit somewhat condensed ~ we learn four more lessons: **Show up. Your ministry is right in front of you. Love anyway. And God has the last word.**

I don't like to preach about judgement. I think there's far too much judgement among Christians and in churches and I think that it's mostly directed at people who vote differently or worship differently or live differently than we do. I don't like to think about judgement because when I do I'm uncomfortably aware of (and sometimes wallow in) my own sinfulness and failures. But I'd be remiss if I didn't preach about judgement because it's part of scripture, part of our life with God, and of course, why we need Jesus Christ. This story of Jonah and God is about judgement and mercy and humanity's response to them both. Jonah received a call from God to go to Ninevah, to "that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come before Me," God told Jonah. God is a present God, not an absentee God who created the world and then

has left us to our own devices. (Although that does sometimes seem to be the case.)
God sees us, God cares about all of us, and (this is the radical message of the gospel)
God shares this life with us.

The first Sunday of this sermon series we heard a shofar, which is the horn used to call our Jewish brothers and sisters to repentance. To repent is to be aware of our sins and failures... to ask for forgiveness from God and from whomever we've hurt or wronged, and with the help of God, to turn around - to turn away from - that harmful and unloving behavior. We don't know how the word of God came to Jonah, only that it did come to him; he heard it clearly. The first lesson from Jonah for today is: **Show up.** Whatever ministry God has for you isn't going to come electronically (via tv or car radio or podcast or music or whatever sounds you use for pleasure and distraction.) God's first language is actually silence, so you've got to hold, and practice, some silence in your life to hear God. Don't obsess about hearing God's voice. Most of us don't hear an audible voice. God's voice can come as ideas, as inspiration, as hunches, even as a response to a situation that breaks your heart. But if you're not listening for God it's less likely that you'll hear God. So one of the lessons from Jonah is: **Show up.** Have a devotional life. Be as consistent about prayer and silence and reading scripture as you are about having morning coffee and flossing your teeth. In order to be aware of God's presence in your life you've got to practice listening. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said that the Christian life is two things: one of them is devotional life, which he called piety, and is time spent thinking and reading about God, worshiping and listening to God, and talking with others about your walk with Christ. This is one arm, if you will, of the Christian life. If you're not practicing some aspects of piety, of devotion,

of inviting Christ into your world, then you're not showing up. We have several faith-sharing groups at church, and there are other kinds of study and prayer and faith-sharing groups in the community, and there are tons of spiritual resources online, so there's no reason, and no excuse, to not practice a life of piety. Jesus said one of the two most important things we are to do is to love God with everything we are. One of the lessons God has for us in the story of Jonah is [say it with me] **Show up.**

The second lesson is: **Your ministry is right in front of you.** This is the information age, and the age of information overload. The needs of the world press in on us, 24 hours a day, if we let them. We are all in danger of overwhelm and burnout and apathy towards the needs of the world... because there are so many and many are beyond our resources, and seemingly beyond the wisdom and compassion of our world leaders. The word of the Lord came to Jonah: "Go at once to Ninevah, that great city..." and God outlined for Jonah what he was to do in Ninevah. Where's Ninevah? Where's that place you know of, where people need your help... your physical and spiritual help, where people need to know about God's love and mercy? Where would it bless you to answer God's call to love and serve, to be in ministry to those in need?

Robyn Roberts leads the Outreach Ministry team and they use the money we give to the special holiday offerings to support ministries here in our community and around the world. Ginny Horner leads the Stitch-in-Time Ministry and they make dresses for girls who have no dresses, and they knit hats for people in Afghanistan. Vila Schwindt leads the Women's Ministry and they raise awareness and money to support ministries all over the world, and here at home. Pat Hershey and Joe Darrell and Vic and Fran Smith and others faithfully and regularly work at the Food Bank, ministering to

the thousands of people in our county who don't have enough to eat. Judy Stillman is the Executive Director of the Winter Nights Rotating Homeless Shelter, and she invites faith communities to make places of safety and welcome for our homeless brothers and sisters. Chris Coons serves on the Lafayette Peace and Justice Center. And last Sunday we blessed all of those who serve as our Spiritual Leaders and on our Ministry Teams. There are a multitude of ways to serve in our congregation, and in our community. These are just a few people to talk with to get some inspiration. You don't need to board a ship for Ninevah or the Outer Hebrides to find a ministry, a place to serve. What you'll find as you show up, as you listen for God, is that God puts people in your life who need you. Jesus said the other most important thing we are to do is to love others. We do that by serving them. This is the second aspect of the Christian life, according to John Wesley: practicing mercy. It's the other "arm" if you will, of the cross. It's the other identifying characteristic of followers of Jesus. If you don't have a ministry then you're probably not showing up, and you're not paying attention to God's call. Because one of the lessons from Jonah is [say it with me] **Your ministry... is right in front of you.**

In chapter four of Jonah, Jonah is angry with God for having compassion on Nineveh, where the great evil and violence of the people had come to God's notice. God saw that the people repented, and God had compassion on them. "Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, 'God! I knew it - when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew You were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn Your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!'" It's funny that Jonah is so angry

with God for simply being God who is... “sheer grace and mercy, rich in love, ready to offer forgiveness.” Last week I said that this was the bitterest thing for Jonah to swallow. More bitter than mouthfuls of the seawater he swallowed when the crew threw him overboard and the big fish swallowed him. Jonah hated that God forgives. God is merciful. God always loves.

It’s tempting to believe that our enemies are God’s enemies. But God doesn’t have enemies. Now you may ready with an argument that God hates sinners. God may hate sin (I’d say rather than God is disappointed, betrayed, and heartbroken by our sin) but more importantly than what God is against, is what God is for. And Jonah couldn’t stomach that what God is for - the essence of God - is mercy and forgiveness and love. Jonah was so angry at God that he wanted to die. Jonah is a comical character but he’s also us. He’s resentful, stingy, and exclusive like we are. Jonah wanted all of God’s goodness and salvation to be for the Chosen People of God, and none of it to be measured out to Jonah’s enemies. Unfortunately we see Jonah’s story in American life right now; some voices calling for all of God’s blessings for ourselves alone, sometimes without compassion and mercy towards others.

Jesus clearly said that what identifies us as His followers is how we love. Not how we love our friends and our families but how we love those who are against us. Those who show us no kindness or welcome. The enemy. The other. That’s who we are to love. Jonah couldn’t do that. It was too hard, too bitter to see his enemies through God’s eyes. One of the sad lessons from Jonah is what he wasn’t able to do. He wasn’t able to open his heart and love with God’s love. What God demonstrates in this story is

what Jesus showed us. That nothing can separate us from God's love, and because of that, we are to [say it with me] **Love anyway.**

Love anyway is not a mantra or a magic formula. It takes all of our lives to love as God loves us, as Jesus has shown us, as the Holy Spirit nudges us to do. And it's community work. We learn to love in community, as a church, as the Body of Christ, as we work and worship together, as we forgive each other, as we speak the truth in love to each other. We are meant to be together, as the church, because this is where and how we learn to love as Jesus loves.

The last lesson from Jonah is: **God has the last word.** Gracie Allen was part of the comedic act of Burns and Allen; the wife of George Burns who played God in the 1970's movie, "Oh God." Gracie once wrote in a letter to George, "Don't put a period where God has put a comma. God is still speaking."

Jonah sulked, hoping to change God's mind about the Ninevites. Jonah even prayed to die, hoping to change God's mind about the Ninevites. Jonah wanted the last word. Jonah wanted to write the story about the deserved destruction of the Ninevites. But God had the last word. God saved the sailors by calming the storm at sea; God saved Jonah when he prayed from the belly of the fish; God saved the people of Ninevah when they turned away from their wickedness. God always responds to cries for mercy and forgiveness. And because God does... we have to also offer mercy and forgiveness and second chances. And if we don't, we look as ridiculous as Jonah does. Sitting on a hillside in the hot sun, pouting and trying to manipulate God.

This story has kind of an unsatisfying end; we don't know what happens to Jonah. But what we do know is the lesson we learn from him. It's that [say it with me] **God always... has the last word.**

I began this sermon talking about my discomfort about judgement. Jonah was also uncomfortable with God's judgement, because God withheld it, and Jonah wanted a great display of fireworks of it towards the Ninevites. We are all sinners, and all of us struggle to love and forgive and offer mercy... all of us judge others and ourselves. If we had it all together, and if we were perfect, we'd have no need for a Savior. This is the sign of God's great, incomprehensible love and mercy towards us: that God gave us a Savior in Jesus Christ. Jesus took our sin and brokenness to the cross. We don't live under judgement but under God's love. And the only way this makes sense, or makes a difference, is for you and me to love others just as God loves us. All we have to do to access God's love and mercy is to turn around, and ask for it.

I invite you to pray this prayer with me: **Thank You God, for loving me, and for having mercy on me. Thank You for forgiving my sin, and my stubbornness, and my self-centeredness. I invite You to live in my heart, and take control of my life. Thank You that because of Your love for me, in Jesus Christ, I am healed, I am a new creation, and I am Your beloved. Thank You Jesus! Amen.**