

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (NRSV)

**Narrator:**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.

**The Lord:**

Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.

**Narrator**

So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

**Narrator:**

Jonah spent the day going into the heart of the city, crying out as he walked,

**Jonah:**

Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!

**Narrator:**

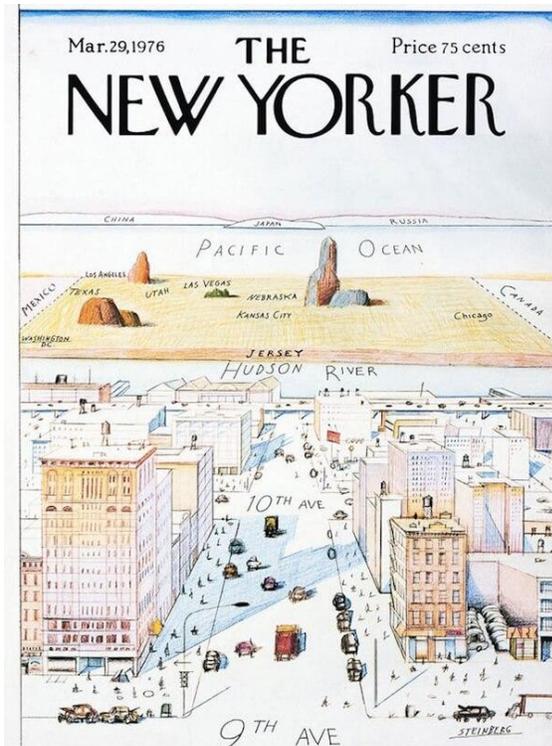
The people believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and everyone great and small, from the king to the animals of the field, put on sackcloth, turned from their evil ways, and cried out to God.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God repented from the calamity God had planned to bring upon them;; and did not do it.

**GOD MOVES BOTH INSIDE AND OUT**



I love New York. How many of you love New York? I'm not a native New Yorker, but I've come to love the state, and particularly the city. And I think that the main reason I love New York is that I've always liked variety; variety of food, variety of music, variety of *people*. You don't have to travel far in New York City to meet people of so many backgrounds and cultures from all over the world.



But love of New York City can actually narrow our view of the rest of the world. I love this New Yorker magazine cover that shows a view from 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue; you see 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the Westside Highway, the Hudson River, New Jersey, then Kansas City, Nebraska, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Mexico, Canada, Japan, China, and Russia. That's how some New Yorkers look at the world, diminishing everything outside of Manhattan. This picture really illustrates how our bias toward a particular place can distort our vision or understanding of everything else. You see this same regionalism in the Bible in the life of Jesus who comes from this town called Nazareth, and people from other provinces considered Nazareth and backward place; when the disciple Philip invites his brother Nathaniel to come and meet this fellow Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel replies, "Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" People of Bethsaida in Galilee looked down on people from Nazareth in Galilee, people from Judea looked down on people from Galilee, and people from Jerusalem looked down on everyone. This same distorted view of the world so well illustrated on this New Yorker magazine cover was evident in Jerusalem over two thousand years ago.

And our biases are not just based on geography; we have cultural and religious biases as well. Jews, at the time of Jonah, generally speaking, looked down upon Gentiles. You probably know the story of Jonah. Mostly we remember that he spent three days and three nights in the belly of a fish, but remember how he got there; God was sending Jonah to tell the people of Nineveh, a Gentile city, to turn away from their evil ways, and Jonah disobeys God and heads in the opposite direction, hiding on a ship heading west. It's not so much because Jonah is *afraid* of the people of Nineveh, though fear is often at heart of prejudice; rather Jonah despises the people of Nineveh, the Assyrians who worship their goddess, Ishtar, who have conquered Israel and now rule over the people.

Jonah wants God to destroy Nineveh, and would rather not tell the people to repent. When a storm threatens to sink the ship, the sailors realize that God must be angry with someone on the ship, and they figure correctly that it's Jonah, so they throw him overboard and the ship is spared. That's how Jonah ended up in the whale, or rather the great fish.



And it's only when Jonah accepts that God has indeed won that God causes the fish to spew Jonah out onto a beach. Then God tells Jonah again to go to Nineveh and tell that in 40 days God's going to destroy the city. Then something unusual happens. This great, pagan, Assyrian city repents. Keep in mind too that the Assyrian empire controlled Israel and Jerusalem; in the conventional way of thinking, that would mean that their gods were stronger than the God of Israel. Yet everyone, including the king and all the animals, put on sackcloth and ashes and starts fasting. God, seeing that the hearts of the people have turned, decides not to destroy the city. And Jonah is upset with God for sparing this gentile, Assyrian, pagan city.

The point I'd like to make is that when God calls us to move, we need to move on the outside, but God intends for us to move on the inside as well. Jonah is called to go to Nineveh and warn a city of God's impending judgment. But just as God's word through Jonah causes the Ninevites to move in their spirit, to repent of the wicked ways, God is calling Jonah to move away from his prejudice. Jonah may not think the people of Nineveh are worth a hill of beans, but God considers them as children worthy of salvation just as the Jews are worthy of salvation. God wants Jonah to see that being "God's chosen people" does not mean that other people are not God's people.

That leads us to wonder what it means to be *chosen* by God. If it is God's will to spare the Ninevites from destruction, then being *chosen* does not mean that you're the only ones God has *chosen* to save. And because the Assyrians who are worthy of salvation had conquered Israel, being God's chosen must not mean that you are chosen to rule over other people. So what does it mean to be chosen?

Quite simply is that we are chosen to move, to speak and act on God's behalf, not to claim some special privilege or authority over others but to convey God's love and mercy and will to everyone and *everything* (since cows are apparently able to repent). . We are messengers; I said that last week – being a Christian is not about piety – about

not sinning or misbehaving. Being a Christian is about PROCLAIMING, proclaiming first and foremost that God is real and immensely loving and that he can rule your heart this very instant just as he will be ruling this world in righteousness someday, which means that there will be peace and justice and joy and harmony eternally someday, and we'll all be part of that kingdom someday. Our good behavior that we exercise is not a way of obtaining a place in that kingdom; rather our good behavior is the result of our faith in that kingdom of love and mercy and justice. We live into that kingdom NOW because we BELIEVE in it, and beliefs impact behavior. And we are chosen to urge others to believe as well so that they can live into that kingdom of God.

But we don't always approach our task as God's "chosen" with great zeal, perhaps because, like Jonah, we misunderstand the meaning of "chosen." We think it means that we have a special place in God's kingdom, and there's limited capacity. We would rather NOT see certain people in the same kingdom, so we abandon them to their wicked ways and hope that God's going to destroy them like Jonah hopes that God will destroy the city of Nineveh. We pre-judge by withholding God's love, and the news of God's love, from others. But while not everyone is "chosen" everyone IS a child of God, and a child, whether adopted or otherwise, does not choose who her parents will be. Neither do we choose to be God's children. When the prodigal son leaves home and goes off to squander his father's wealth, the father does not disown the son, rather he embraces the son when he finally comes home. Thus it is with God; we can run away, but that does not change the fact that we are God's beloved children.

It's important for us to recognize something of Jonah in ourselves, something that keeps us from moving in the direction God wants us to move, and that something is prejudice. Scholars believe that the reason the book of Jonah was written was that there were lots of Jonahs in Judeo, lots of Jews who despised anyone who was not a Jew and believed that God had it in his plans to destroy all the enemies of the Jews, starting with the folks who had conquered them, folks like the Assyrians, with their dirty pagan gods and idols.

But the author of this wonderful book took that notion and stood it on its head. God was not simply a God of one nation, and God was not an enemy of foreign nations. God wanted to change people's evil ways, and among the people he wanted to change were people like Jonah, people who are so disappointed that God does not obliterate the people they deem enemies. And God asks Jonah, in essence, "Why should I despise the people you despise?"

Last week we celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who spent his adult life working to see that black people in this country might be treated no different than anyone else and that people would not make distinctions and judge based on something as irrelevant as color of skin. But that is our human affliction, the affliction of sin, the desire to compare ourselves with others and somehow deem ourselves superior to someone else.

And if there is any advantage to being one of God's "chosen" people, to being someone like Jonah, that advantage is that we are moved to confront our prejudices. That's what we get for being chosen by God; we get the pleasure of being transformed, of getting tossed into stormy seas and spending days inside a big fish for failing to follow God. He does it because he loves us, and because he loves others as well.

So today I ask you today, "How is God moving you on the outside and on the inside?" Is he telling you, his chosen advocate, to take his message to people you don't particularly like? If so, be thankful, because he may be moving you to grow in your capacity to love, to care beyond the familiar region where you feel so safe.