

Great!

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Introduction

I enjoy reading. My favorite author is David McCullough. And I love to read biographies about great leaders. One of my goals is to read a really good biography about every American president who served before I was born. Right now I am reading a book about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt called "No Ordinary Time."

I have also always enjoyed reading to children. When my own kids were in elementary school, I would go into their classrooms every week and read. Sometimes the teachers would have me listen to students were just learning to read. One of those students came up to me at Speedway several months ago, introduced himself, and thanked me for helping him. He told me that he is "paying it forward," doing every week what I used to do in his classroom.

There is a really nice series of children's books by Marjorie Sharmat about a little boy detective named Nate the Great." The author's website describes Nate like this:

There isn't a case too great for the one and only Nate. Come to think of it, there really isn't a case too small for him, either.

With help from his friends, his trusty dog Sludge and a few pancake pick-me-ups along the way, Nate the Great uses smarts and smiles to solve the most baffling mysteries that could ever befall a kid in elementary school.

Nate the Great. Alexander the Great. The Great Houdini. A great white shark. The great lakes. Any number of things in our experience and in our world get the label of being "great."

And so it is in the third chapter of Jonah. The key word in this chapter is "great!"

#1: A Great City

Ninevah was a "great city." That is the description God gave to it when He issued the command to Jonah to go there and preach.

Go to the great city of Nineveh... (v. 2)

And indeed it was a great city.

Ninevah was the capital city of Assyria, one of the world's greatest powers.

- In the book of Genesis we learn that Ninevah was founded by the mighty warrior Nimrod.

- It was the largest city in the world up until 612 B.C. when it was essentially destroyed in a civil war.
- King Sennacherib was ruled at the height of its glory.
- The biblical text tells us that it took Jonah three days to cover the entire city as he walked around and preached God's Word to them. Depending on how you understand that description, it could mean that the circumference – the outerbelt – of the city was about 60 miles long.

But not only was Ninevah great in terms of its size and political power, it was also known as a city that had a great amount of sin. It was extremely wicked in every way. The Ninevites worshiped the goddess Ishtar – a worship that centered around sacred prostitution and male homosexuality. Therefore, worship services were essentially orgies.

The Assyrians were also ruthless when they conquered other nations, known for its brutal treatment of those it conquered. They were notorious for amputating hands and feet, gouging eyes, and skinning and impaling their captives just because they could.

The biblical book of Nahum is filled with prophetic words of condemnation about God's anger with these people:

I am against you. . . . I will burn up your chariots in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will leave you no prey on the earth. The voices of your messengers will no longer be heard (Nahum 2:13)

The final verse of Nahum's book emphasizes the violence of the Assyrians in the form of a rhetorical question:

All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty? (Nahum 3:19)

#2: A Great Message

It was to this great city that Jonah came with a great message. When he was first commissioned by God to go on this preaching journey, God told Jonah:

Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me. (Jonah 1:2)

And so, after a slight detour that took him into the belly of a whale for three days, Jonah went to Ninevah and began to proclaim:

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown. (Jonah 3:4)

That is a hard message to proclaim...but it is also a great one. Because God is a God of justice, He does not – in fact, by His very nature, He cannot – allow sin to go unpunished. There will always be a day of reckoning.

When we look at all the evil occurring in the world around us, we can be assured that God will day say, "Enough is enough!" and He will begin the process of confronting people and nations and policies with their sin.

Paul expressed it like this when he preached his sermon to the Greeks at Mars Hill:

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

#3: A Great Impact

Jonah's preaching of this great message had a great impact. In verses that were not read this morning, the unnamed king of Assyria issued this national proclamation:

By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. (Jonah 3:7-9)

And the people did repent.

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. (Jonah 3:5)

In repentance, we come to see our sin as God sees it. That's a major transformation in our perspective. People who don't repent tend to respond to thoughts about their sin in ways like this:

- It's just a little sin
- I know people who do things much worse than this
- No one is getting hurt by it

But when genuine repentance occurs, we begin to see that our sin is so vile that it required the death of Jesus on the cross to atone for it. And we hate it. We might even hate ourselves for being capable of doing it.

John Newton, the writer of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, wrote:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me ...

He borrowed that descriptor from the Apostle Paul who said:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me...? (Romans 7:24)

Repentance comes to its fullest expression when we then say, "God with Your help, I will never do that again. Forgive me!"

#4: A Great God

When we get to that point ... when we come to the place that we realized the horror of our sinful ways ... when we turn our back on our sinful ways, it is then that we come to see that we have a great God!

Our God is full of compassion. He wants to forgive us. He is looking for every opportunity to keep us away from the pain of His judgment.

So when these Ninevites genuinely repented and turned their hearts toward God, we read:

When God saw ... how they turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened. (Jonah 3:10)

And the really great thing about all of this is that when God forgives a sin, it will never again be brought up and held against us. The sin is gone. Psalm 103 describes it like this:

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:11-12)

Or the way the prophet Micah says it:

You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:19)

Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who, along with her father and other family members, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust and was then imprisoned for her actions. I heard her speak many years ago, and referring to this verse, she would say:

God has taken our sin. He has thrown it into the sea of forgetfulness, and he has posted a sign that says, "No fishing allowed."

How great is that!!

APPLICATION

Here is the message I hope you are hearing from me today:

- No person ... no thing ... no place ... no earthly power is greater than our God. No matter how great that entity might be. It can be a great city full of great sin, but its greatness pales in comparison to our Great God.

- Better yet, no sin is greater than our God's power to forgive. His compassion is beyond our comprehension. His greatest desire is that men and women might be saved. No matter what you may have done, our God is greater than your sin and His power and His willingness to forgive that sin are unequalled.

Sometimes in our liturgy we quote the words of Scripture recorded in 1 John 1:9:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

I also like the way the same message is communicated in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin (2 Chronicles 7:14)

There is no magic formula for a prayer of repentance. Every Lutheran liturgy contains some version of one. But the one I like best is the simple prayer offered by a sinner standing off in the corner of the Temple in one of the parables of Jesus. He just prayed seven words – words that are easy to remember:

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. (Luke 18:13)

If you pray that prayer ... and mean it from the depths of your heart, God will forgive any sin you have ever committed.

How great is that!