

Two weeks ago, we started looking at the story of Jonah. When Jonah first heard God tell him to go and preach in Nineveh, he ran fast in the other direction—both from the Lord and what the Lord told him to do. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, which was Israel's greatest enemy. Nineveh was well known for its callous disregard of all that God's people stood for, as well as its violent treatment of its enemies. But it's quite clear in the story that God wants to do something in Nineveh, something surprising. He cares about Nineveh and the people there.

You may recall about two weeks ago, I said at the end of my message that we live in Nineveh. It's no secret the San Francisco Peninsula and what we call Silicon Valley isn't a place where followers of Jesus feel necessarily welcome. While many people here might call themselves "spiritual," very few would subscribe to anything close to the historic Christian faith. The spiritual beliefs of most people here are really an amalgamation of various religious views, with the sense either there are many paths to God, or spirituality is simply the quest for inner peace and purpose. Someone has used the term "smart skeptic" to describe the highly educated worker in Silicon Valley. This skepticism, along with skyrocketing housing costs, high taxes, and a host of other factors, are causing many Christ-followers to flee from this place, much like Jonah ran from Nineveh.

But what if God wanted to do something out of the box here? What if God wanted to make the Bay Area a display case for his reckless love? I, for one, believe that is what God wants to do here. And I believe we can see here in Jonah chapter 3 what it will take for that to happen. Both of these things have to do with experiencing God's relentless grace. First, we'll look at God's relentless grace in our own lives. Second, we'll look at it in those who are still far from God.

God's relentless grace in our lives

Jonah 3 begins with these words, *"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you'"* (vv. 1-2). These verses are almost an exact repeat of God's call to Jonah in chapter 1. The big difference is in chapter 1, God called him *"Jonah, son of Amittai,"* but here he replaces "son of Amittai" with "a second time." So now Jonah, "son of Amittai," has become *"Jonah, the second time."* I like that! God gives second chances. Jonah ran from God, but God didn't give up on Jonah, and he won't give up on you. He gives you not just a second chance, but a third, and a fourth, etc.

There are other subtle differences in this second call from God compared to chapter 1. God had told Jonah to "preach against it (Nineveh), because its wickedness has come up before me," but here, he simply tells Jonah to "proclaim to it the message I give you." He's not to preach "against it" but "to it." He says nothing about Nineveh's wickedness, but he just tells Jonah to proclaim the message the Lord gives him. The subtle differences leave us wondering if we should expect something besides judgment. Maybe there's hope for Nineveh?

But the most significant difference from chapter 1 is Jonah's response to God's call. Chapter 1 says, *"But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish,"* whereas, here it says at the start of verse 3, *"Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh."* When you think about what he'd just gone through, being swallowed by a huge fish, sitting in that smelly, disgusting place for three days, then being spat out onto dry ground, no wonder he obeyed the Lord this time! I sure hope he got to at least shower before he walked 500 miles to Nineveh!

But let's just pause and think about this. I want you to see God's relentless grace in Jonah's life. It started with a calling. Of course, we know God calls us out of His grace. Every one of us is a called person. First, God calls us to himself, and then he calls us to be part of his mission. Our God is a missionary God. From Genesis to Revelation, he's a God who calls and sends. In two weeks, we'll start a series on the life of Abraham. God called Abraham to a place he knew nothing about. God said to him, "I want to bless you." But it doesn't end there. He also said, "I want to make you a blessing." You see, that's what God says to each of us. "I want to bless you, but I'm blessing you to make you a blessing." God never blesses you except to make you a blessing. Ask yourself, "How has God blessed me?" And then ask, "How can I use that to bless others?"

And, in doing that, he'll call you to do things that take you out of your comfort zone, as we see here with Jonah. God's calling always does that. Jesus left the ultimate comfort zone in heaven to come to this planet, as he put it, "to seek and to save the lost." Talk about leaving your comfort zone! How do you think Simon Peter and his brother Andrew felt when Jesus saw them casting fishing nets into the sea and called out to them, *"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people"* (Matt. 4:19). God's call often comes to us in the most inopportune times. Think how Jonah felt. He's been three days inside the fish! I'd want some time off, wouldn't you? But, God picks him up like

a wet rag, points him toward Nineveh, and says, "Go!" There's absolutely no excuse for anyone who calls themselves a follower of Jesus to just live for themselves; to stay comfortable; to retire from being called.

But here's the beautiful thing Jonah teaches us: Even when we turn the other way, even when we blow it, even when we want nothing to do with God's call, he comes again and gives us another shot. Brandon Pasion gave me a great quote this week: "When God places his calling in your life, he factors in your stupidity." That's God's relentless grace. He's the God who gives second chances. Think about it. He gave Moses a second chance. Moses knew God called him to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. But Moses actually ran ahead of God and tried to enact that by killing an Egyptian. This was Moses' way of bringing about deliverance, but not God's way. So Moses had to flee from Egypt to Midian, where he lived in obscurity as a shepherd for 40 years. You'd think Moses ruined his chances at any future ministry. But after 40 years, God appeared to him in a bush and sent him back to Egypt. He gave Moses a second chance.

He also gave Simon Peter a second chance. Peter had boasted he'd never desert the Lord. He said, "I'll follow you anywhere, Lord. I'll lay my life down for you." But that very night, he denied he even knew the Lord, not once or twice, but three times. Peter thought he was finished after that, a washed-up disciple. He went back to his fishing boat; certain God had put him on the shelf for good. But the risen Jesus appeared to Peter and called him a second time. Three times the Lord said to him, "Go and feed my sheep."

Maybe you need a second chance or even a third or fourth chance. This church is made for people like that. God loves to use washed-up disciples like Jonah, Moses, and Peter. When we fail him as these three did, when we experience the collapse of our own courage, faith, and resolve, then God can really use us because it's no longer about us. It's no longer our courage, our faith, and our strength. It is his strength. I'm convinced our experiences of failure can make us better servants of his. We can become more humble and approachable. Sure, it's possible to become bitter and isolated as a result of our failures. Jonah could have refused God a second time because he felt so unworthy. But we have to let God use our failures not to make us bitter but better, to make us more dependent on Him!

It's never going to be easy. It wasn't easy for Jonah. But even after a second chance, when you're doing what God calls you to do, there's a sense of peace that comes. Kirsten Strand writes:

I've learned that ignoring a calling can lead to depression, anger, frustration, and a deep dissatisfaction with life. And I've learned that following a calling can also lead to moments of depression, anger, frustration, and loneliness. Yet, underneath those feelings will be a profound sense of peace and satisfaction.

So God's relentless grace is seen in our own lives, but the second thing we see in Jonah 3 is God's relentless grace is seen in the lives of those who are far from God.

God's relentless grace in those far from God

Jonah arrives in Nineveh, and the narrator starts not by telling us what happened there; instead, he tells us something about Nineveh itself. He says, "*Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it*" (v. 3b). Back in chapter 1 and again in here in verse 2, God calls Nineveh a "great city." But here, he also calls it "a very large city." But that's an inadequate translation because literally, this should read, "a very important city to God." That's a literal reading of the Hebrew text. This city was very important to God! Why? Well, part of the reason is there were so many people there. God cared about people. The narrator says it was so large, "it took three days to go through it." We know from chapter 4:11 there were more than 120,000 people there. God told Jonah they were people "who can't tell their right hand from their left," which means they didn't know good from evil.

So Nineveh was a great city, a city important to God. That's interesting because we ordinarily think of cities as bad places with lots of crime, poverty, and sin going on. We often portray rural life as ideal and city life as degrading. But did you know in the Bible cities are actually viewed as the best possible places to live? People wanted to live in a city in ancient times because cities had walls, which meant safety and security. Cities were also known as places of greater productivity and creativity. Of course, with humanity falling into sin, cities also became corrupt. You see this with the city of Babel, which was a place where humankind sought to glorify itself above God. But, still, Jerusalem was called "the city of God." We're told Abraham "*was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*" (Heb. 11:10). And Revelation 21 depicts the apex of God's redemption as a city called the New Jerusalem. John says, "*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel...*" (Rev. 21:2, 11).

The importance of the city can be seen in the ministry of the apostle Paul. If you read the book of Acts, it's clear his strategy, led by the Holy Spirit, was to evangelize cities. He didn't go preach out in the rural areas; he went into cities. The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery says,

It is easy to see that the mission strategy of the early church was to evangelize the city. It is no exaggeration to say that in Acts the church is almost exclusively associated with the city.

Why is that? Because as the city goes, so goes the culture. Whatever grabs hold of the city, eventually will grab hold of the rest of the country. Not everyone is called to live in the city, nor does God care more about city-dwellers than those who live in

rural areas, but if we want to make a difference, it will start in the city. Today, almost 50 percent of the world's population lives in cities, compared to 5 percent two centuries ago. And in the developing world, five million people move into the cities each month.

What am I getting at here? I believe this metropolitan place we call the Bay Area is a city that's "very important to God." It's not just that eight million people live here. This is also the technological capital of the world. People from all over the world praise the greatness of the innovations that begin here. The companies that produce them are known worldwide. The leaders responsible for them are recognizable not just in San Francisco but in Tokyo, Moscow, and Dubai. The stories of Bill and Dave, who started Hewlett-Packard, and the two Steves who started Apple are the stuff of books, movies, and sitcoms.

The Bay Area is "very important to God" because the eight million people who live here are all important to God, from the greatest of them to the least, from the richest to the poorest, from Mark Zuckerberg to those who'd love a job waiting tables at the restaurants he eats at. This place is "very important to God" because so many people are lost here. Compared to the rest of the country, the percentage of those who identify themselves as followers of Jesus is minuscule. We have far more than 120,000 persons who, lacking an understanding of the gospel, don't know their right hand from their left, can't distinguish between good and evil. The Bay Area is very much like Nineveh in this respect.

So, not only do those who are called need God's relentless grace, so also do the people who live here. But what will need to happen for them to experience this grace? Look what happened in Nineveh.

Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. vv. 4-5

Jonah begins to preach. It's a short message, just five words in the Hebrew language! Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown." It sounds severe, but the truth is there's hope in this message. The number 40 is often symbolic of a period of testing. Is Nineveh being tested? What will this test reveal about Nineveh? And the word "overthrown" appears to imply condemnation and destruction, but the Hebrew word can also be translated as "turned around." It's used in other places to convey the idea of being transformed and delivered (Deut. 23:5). Is Nineveh destined for destruction or deliverance?

It appears Jonah doesn't get more than a day's journey into the city, and people are taking his message seriously. It simply says, "Nineveh believed God." Yes, Jonah was the messenger, but it was really God they believed. They believed that what God said would happen in 40 days, would happen! And because of that,

they began to fast, and all of them, again from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. These were expressions of repentance, remorse, and humility.

And it didn't stop there. Instead of this repentance trickling down from the leaders to the people, somehow it trickled up to the king.

When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

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. vv. 6-9

Notice the difference between Jonah and the king. In chapter 1, Jonah was commanded to arise and go to Nineveh, but instead, he rose and ran in the opposite direction. We might expect the king to rise from his throne to have Jonah executed. But instead, he hears the word of the Lord, and he repents. And he takes it even further. The people were already fasting, but now he orders heightened fasting—no one can taste anything. They can't even drink anything! As if that weren't enough, even the livestock must wear sackcloth and fast, which is a big deal because many of them would die.

Finally, the king says, "*Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.*" There's humility in this statement. He's not presuming anything. God isn't bound to have compassion for them. That's why he says, "Who knows?" That's why he hopes for compassion or mercy. You don't earn compassion and mercy; you just cry out and hope for it. The king didn't know why, but he had good reason to hope for the best. The Lord once spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, saying,

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. Jer. 18:7-8

That's exactly what happened in Nineveh. God was more than willing to offer his compassion. "*When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened*" (v. 10). Just as the Lord heard the voice of Jonah from the sea, he sees Nineveh's repentance, and he spares them. He spared the sailors. He spared Jonah. And now he spares Nineveh. That's relentless grace.

Could something like what happened in Nineveh happen here in the Bay Area? If so, how might it happen? Well, how did it

happen in Nineveh? It happened because all of them became aware of their sin and impending judgment from the greatest to the least. They cried out to God, and they repented, showing that in their actions. For this to happen here in the Bay Area, we too, must become aware that our ways are evil. You might think we're not evil like Nineveh was evil. I mean, we're so progressive in our thinking. How could we be evil? But evil takes all kinds of forms, and the essence of it is to refuse to submit to and worship Almighty God and the One he sent to be the Savior of the world. We may not be evil in quite the same way Islamic Terrorists are evil, but our ways are evil nonetheless. It's only if we become aware that the judgment of God is on us, and we genuinely turn to Him, that we can hope he'll relent and pour out his grace upon us.

It also happened because one man, a very reluctant man, an imperfect man, a man in need himself of the grace of God, entered Nineveh and proclaimed the word of the Lord. If the Bay Area is to see anything like what happened in Nineveh, we who live here will need to understand this place is very important to God, and we're called here for a purpose. The history of the Bay Area is such that people come here to get rich and then leave. It was true in the days of the Gold Rush; it's been true ever since. But we need people to come here and invest deeply in this place. We need people who love this place enough to put on sackcloth, fast, and cry out to God for this place. We need people willing to proclaim the word of the Lord to this place. The good news is I've seen that happen in the past few years. I've seen the wind of the Spirit blowing on this place. I believe God is on the move here, just as he was in Nineveh.

Several years ago, we invited a man named Haddon Robinson to preach here at CPC. Haddon has since gone to be with Jesus, but at the time, he was a well-known professor of preaching at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Boston. Haddon was named one of the top ten preachers in the English-speaking world by Time Magazine. His book, *Biblical Preaching*, is still the book seminaries use to train budding preachers. I did my doctoral work under Haddon and considered him a mentor.

I had Haddon fly in on a Friday so our elders could spend some time with him on Saturday. I was pretty excited. We asked questions and had a great discussion. But I'll never forget something he said towards the end of our conversation. He was reflecting on the current state of the church in America, and then he declared, "I believe America is under the judgment of God." We were all shocked. Then he said, "And there's nothing we can do about it."

I've thought about that. I think he was right on one count on wrong on another. America, and the Bay Area, in particular, is under the judgment of God. But I think he was wrong there's nothing we can do about it. I think God's grace is so relentless in the lives of those of us who believe, and in the lives of those far from God, that there's hope. We need to pray. We need to preach. We need to care. *"Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."*

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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