

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from January 17, 2021



Opening Prayer

Our living Lord of compassion, we've come to worship to remind ourselves that merciful love is what triumphs, that you are at work in your creation, to recognize your greatness, and to seek your strength to courageously live as your people on this earth so that you receive the glory due your name. Amen.

Call to Worship (R1: Reader 1 R2: Reader 2)

Intro: Last week we were at the Jordan River, eagerly submitting to the baptism of repentance, preparing for the arrival of God's king and kingdom. Then we witnessed John pointing to Jesus as that coming king who would baptize with the Spirit of God, and then we watched as John baptized Jesus, signifying (among other things), the beginning of his ministry. Since then, Jesus has gone out into the wilderness -- an event which defined the shape of his role in God's mission, (the kind of Messiah he was going to be). John has been thrown in prison. And now we are down at the lake watching Jesus gather his first recruits....

R1: ... Jesus went into Galilee and preached the Good News from God. Jesus said, "The right time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News!" When Jesus was walking by Lake Galilee, he saw Simon and Simon's brother, Andrew.

R2: They were fishermen and were throwing a net into the lake to catch fish.

R1: Jesus said to them, "Come and follow me. I will make you fishermen for men."

R2: So Simon and Andrew immediately left their nets and followed him.

R1: Jesus continued walking by Lake Galilee. He saw two more brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

R2: They were in their boat, preparing their nets to catch fish...

R1: [Jesus] called them to come with him.

R2: They left their father and followed Jesus. (From Mark 1:14b-20 (ICB))

Music Intro And as we watch that event unfold before our eyes, we realize that Jesus is coming and calling us as well.

Music (vv 1,3) *Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore*

Theme

This is the season that we rise up to respond to God's calling on our life. God is always ready for an adventure, and ready to make a move. Our role is to rise up and listen to the direction he is moving, and to move along with him – following wherever he leads, as did the fishermen in our reading, and ourselves in the hymn.

Between the baptism of repentance and the call to follow, God is showing us that even his warnings about what sin causes is not a final condemnation to its consequences (to which we should be resigning ourselves as Eli did a couple weeks ago). No not that, but it is an attempt to lay a grace-based foundation for positive change -- and not only for our own spiritual journey, but the journey of all. To show this, we go back to hear again the popular story of a reluctant prophet who desires grace for himself, but condemnation for others. A poem by Ters van Wyk sums up the story...

A man was sent by God's Spirit
to pay Nineveh a visit.
He had to warn them
about their sins which God condemns.
Jonah was scared, so off he fared
in a ship far away, instead of God to obey.
When a big storm struck,
the sailors knew who brought bad luck.
They threw him into the ocean,
that brought a [big fish] into motion.
One bite!*
and Jonah got himself a room for the night.
For three days he learned to pray and to preach,
when finally the fish spat him out on to a beach.
Now Jonah was filled with repent.
So off to Nineveh he went.
He warned them about their wicked ways,
and God saved a city in forty days.

Music Intro Our prayer song reminds us that our journey calls us to rise from baptism and rise to answer the calls to not be reluctant, but eager servants of God's justice truth and love. It takes all of our beings to do that, so this week, while the words are going to be the same, the tune is going to be to *Take My Life* and let it be – take our time, our hands, our feet, our voices, our resources, our thoughts, our will, our heart, our love, our very selves – *all* of ourselves.... for thee

Music *Bear the Fruit* (to tune of *Take My Life*)

Bear the fruit repentance shows, lives of justice truth and love. Trust no other claim than those; set your heart on things above.	So we dare to journey on, led by faith through ways untrod till at last we rise to be, servants of the living God.
---	---

Prayers

This week, let's begin our prayer time with silence. Focus on the sun dawning on our altar, Donna is playing through the chorus again. As she does, think about our life, what fruit of repentance do we need to grow? How can we better set our hearts on things above? Is there something else or more I need to do to move to the next level of service to God? Is there something in in our attitudes, our actions, our words that need adjusting? Breathe deeply and relax into listening to your heart as God speaks. **Instrumental of Prayer Chorus**



Almighty God, we seek to listen so that you may renew our minds and transform our lives; for you are our rock and salvation, the one who gives us solid footing as we journey through life's peaks and valleys. When we are with you, we can find peaceful, contented rest for we cannot be shaken even if everything around us seems to be falling apart. When life seeks to harm us and drag us down, we will continue to confidently trust in you to protect us and defend our honor. We will pour our heart out to you for you are our compassionate guardian. This week, we heard of * Patrick Walker looking for meaningful employment, and then Pat Harton asked prayers for * Jeff also seeking work, * for Diane Dover whose son suddenly passed away, and then a nephew the next day from covid, and a sister-in-law sick with covid, for Brenda as she grieves, and for the family of Andrew John AJ Turner as they grieve, * for pastor's parents, both with cancer, * and for Sheila Daniel's son Ken at boot camp, and for all others that you lay on our hearts and minds in these moments and throughout the week.

Lord, the Psalmist reminds us to not trust in force, or deceit, or wealth, or those who seem to carry power -- for against you, they are like the weight of a temporary breath on the scales. But with you is *true* power, and *unfailing* love, and you reward us according to how we follow your will in our daily living. Therefore, we are glad to be in relationship with you, for you are the source and goal of our lives. Help us to live in the fullness of your gospel. Bring perspective on our daily actions as we serve you as our people. Your Son Jesus is our trustworthy guide in this living by the prayer he taught us to pray: **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading From Jonah 3

We heard earlier how Jonah had tried to run away from giving God's message to the Ninevites. God delivers him to the shore and gives him another opportunity to speak God's word for them. Hear the key verses of Jonah chapter 3...

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." ... Jonah obeyed... and went to Nineveh... 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 ... [Then the king issued a proclamation in Nineveh:] "... 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." When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (NIV)

Music Intro If you read on, you'll discover that Jonah wasn't happy, but he should have been, and we should be happy -- to discover what Jesus reinforces over and over -- it is for what the Ninevite king hoped against hope -- that God loves and offers a grace that goes deeper than all of our sins.

Music vv 1,2,4 *Grace That is Greater Than All Our Sin*

Message "Rise Up to Move" Jonah (esp c 3) (Mark 1:14b-20)

When we become willing listeners to God as did young Samuel did 2 weeks ago, and we are willing to be and do what God has shown us (like those being baptized by John and being pointed to Jesus last week), the next step is following -- moving - to do what we have discovered. The Call to Worship quoted a portion of Mark 1 and expressed the immediate willingness of professional fishermen to leave their professions and family business to reorient the rest of their lives around Jesus.

Mark is a no frills, no extra details, bare essence of actions kind of writer. He wastes no space about if or how these fishermen processed this life transforming decision. We don't know if they had met or heard of Jesus before this day, we don't know if there was only the one recorded sentence uttered by Jesus, or that sentence was the summation of an extended conversation or even conversations.

Therefore, we aren't going to look closely at their story this time. Instead, we go back to look at a reluctant disciple - one that took a while to get on board with God's agenda, and see what that has to teach us today. We only heard a few of the verses. I'd encourage you to at some point to read the entire book of Jonah (it

won't take long) in order to refresh yourselves on all of the details. In the end, Jonah did follow God's call and he moved toward Nineveh, Nineveh in turn moved toward God, and God was moved to have compassion on the great city (which I believe was his initial intent), and after which Jonah broke the positive pattern and was moved to anger. We'll talk about that in a few minutes.

We tend to get caught up in the flight and the storm on the sea, the great fish, and being spit up on shore. But Jonah's story contains other interesting and important dynamics for us. One is that while many of the prophets expressed self-doubts about their ability to carry out God's grand mission, Jonah's doubts were not self-deprecating, but aimed at the heart of God's mission itself, so much so that we might wonder why he was included among the sacred texts.

Like Mark, the author's initial narrative simply says God told Jonah to preach against Nineveh's evil and Jonah ran away by ship to Tarshish, and he names no motivation, not process of thinking as to why he did that. Perhaps the author wanted to draw the readers in rather than drive them away by giving them clues to his message for them too early. We'll come back to that later as well. When the story is over, we can backfill in some of the clues of what may have been in Jonah's heart that made him run.

Jonah related to the rural agricultural life -- desert nomads, farmers, and shepherds. Nineveh was a powerful city of 120,000 people, 6 miles of a fortified downtown, surrounded by 60 miles of suburbs, house upon house upon house. There were faith differences, national differences, cultural shock, an unpleasant message to give – to strange foreigners. It is not surprising that Jonah might lose his nerve and start out by heading the wrong way. Just like many of us, at one time or another, we have run away from the challenge that God is calling us to be and to do.

Jonah needed, as they call it in golf, a mulligan – a do over. Golf is one of those tricky sports, just the slightest error in many possible options, the way you grip the club, and the direction you move it – all kinds of different movements – just slightly wrong in any of those things and more, and we find ourselves out of bounds, or pretty near missing the ball altogether. The way I golf, I need two or three mulligans per hole. When it comes to faith, it doesn't take much to have a misstep. We don't always get it right. We all need a Mulligan – a do over. We all need multiple mulligans. We are blessed to have a God who is overly gracious in his mulligan giving, and he keeps giving us one opportunity after another to get it right.

Today's story picks up with Jonah's renewed chance to move with God as God moved toward Nineveh. I'm not sure that Jonah ever overcame his reluctance, as much as he resigned himself to the fact that God was so passionate for the city that Jonah wasn't really going to have any choice in the matter. We cannot easily escape what God desires to work through us. Not because God is harsh, but because he cares – he cares for what is best for us (which is to fulfill our God-given destiny), and he cares for what results he wants to see in us and through us for others because he wants what is best for others as well.

God gives Jonah the message again – and though it is stated negatively to the Ninevites (just as it was stated negatively to Eli a couple weeks ago) the *intent* of the message being proclaimed, as the New Testament says, is that our unchanging God *never* wants *anyone* to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9), and "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). I could quote lots and lots of scriptures. God chooses to reveal His power -- not for stubborn control, but in grace; not in narrow favoritism, but in an eager willingness to forgive *any* people who genuinely repent.

The Repentant

When God offers that opportunity, say: "Okay, God. I will be the kind of person that you want me to be -- demonstrating your grace in all areas of my life. I will turn from my old way of running from you and begin living for you." My experience is that the sooner we accept and reach for this different way of living, the less fighting with or running away from God, (and actually, running away from our true selves as well) the sooner we will make the most of our lives. Jonah and the Ninevites illustrate repentance for us.

It begins with a recognition, regret, and admission of guilt, that we are fleeing from

Recognize, Regret, Admit Failure

God's will. The regret is illustrated by the Ninevites symbolically by ashes and sackcloth, and by prayer, confession, and fasting. But more importantly, these actions demonstrated a heart attitude. They were not empty actions. They lead to a different way of living. It is a good thing the spirit of the heart is what is most important because Jonah didn't have an opportunity on a storm-tossed boat to perform any rituals of mournful regret. In fact, he was sleeping until the sailors woke him up. But he did recognize his part for the storm -- and he had them throw him overboard to save them -- and they reluctantly did so. The sea grew calm and the terrified sailors then sacrificed to Jonah's God. Meanwhile, as Jonah's life was ebbing away in the sea, he remembered God and the Temple and his prayer rose

from the depths and he promised to do right and proclaim that “Salvation comes from the Lord.” (Jonah 2:9)

Were Jonah’s words simply the words of a desperate man in a desperate situation bartering with God? It is pretty common for us to do that – to *sincerely* plea and barter with God to get us out of trouble. But then, once things return to normal, the crisis passes and the desperation fades; it turns out maybe we didn’t really learn our lesson after all -- and immediately, or over time, we settle back into our old way of living. I’m not talking about setbacks as we struggle to leave the old life behind as we embrace the new life – we have to deal with that throughout our life as we continue to grow more Christlike. No, I’m talking about a deliberate return to sin, abandoning the intent to follow God, and sometimes even expecting that a ritual of mourning or spoken words of prayer will exonerate us from future consequences forevermore.

Have a heart-felt life change

But repentance involves a heart-felt life change that inspires us to turn away from evil and turn to God and to keep on that path as best we can. We know Jonah truly turned because when he was back on shore, and the pressure was off, he did not regress but he went on to do what God had asked of him.

Likewise, while the Ninevites could attempt to enforce rituals and prosecute wrongs, but they could not enforce a change in people’s hearts or make them live differently. In a city like that, you cannot enforce every person’s life. That depended upon the people’s voluntary cooperation, a sincere willingness of the people of Nineveh. In fact, we skipped over the fact that Jonah’s message impacted the people first -- and *then* it reached the king. I imagine (in my mind) the leaders hearing the threat and seeing the change in people, and thinking, “Everyone is changing, I guess we leaders had better get on board and so they issued an edict to describe what was already happening.” (Typical politics, I guess 😊) What is amazing, is that they did this without any guarantee or promise of grace, but only in the *possible* hope that God *might* turn from his decision to destroy the city. But we know what God has declared about himself again and again -- His mercy is stronger than our sinfulness. His forgiveness is stronger than his anger. His grace is stronger than his discipline, and his discipline is designed to bring us back to where we belong and to grow us into what we can become. The final verse of today’s reading says that like Jonah, they did turn from their evil ways, so at least for the duration of this story, they had also begun to turn to a new way of living.

This new way is characterized by following God, and following God allows God to do as *He* chooses. If we are following God -- we are following God. Too often, too many act as if they are leading God and he is our servant; and that he should do what we think, what we want, and how we feel, and when we want it to happen.

Strive to *follow* God's will

The Ninevites had it right when they said "We'll turn to God, but who knows what He will do in response. We're just going to open ourselves to him and hope." The supreme authority is left in his hands alone. Repentance means God is in charge, and we are not. We don't tell God what to do, we trust what he does is what is right and is best for us, and we will accept *whatever* He allows to come our way and *whatever* He sends us to do.

Jonah's flight away from Nineveh does not thwart God's purpose - not in the least.

Receive restoration and renewal

He mercifully offers Jonah a second chance to participate in God's missions of redemption, bringing him back to where he needed to be. It was as if, right where his life fell apart, his life begins again – just like in golf, you don't go all the way back to the tee where you drive, unless that is where you did it wrong, you just drop a ball right where you are and do it from there again. Jonah continued the journey to fulfill God's dream and destiny for him, fulfilling his reason for existing on this earth. He picked up right where he left off.

And God gives us mercy too, even after we sin or fail or fall flat on our face; even if we get lost and confused or afraid and run the other direction. God still sends and swallows us up with his salvation and spits us out on to the shore with yet another chance for a new start, a new effort, a new dream, a new vision; a new opportunity.

Now you'd think that Jonah, who desperately needed and received individual renewal and

Reach out to revive others

restoration into God's favor -- would understand the same need and desire for the same type of revival for the whole city of Nineveh. But if we read the rest of the story, (chapter 4) we realize that is *not* what he wanted. He could relate to his own fears, his own reasons for running. He could find it in his heart to feel sorry for himself and his situation, to allow that situation to monopolize his every thought, until finally, he reached bottom, where God graciously bailed him out (no pun intended). He understood all of that, he knew what was going on and expected sympathy from God for himself because he knew what God was like. He also expected it for his own people from their God.

But somehow, he could not make it compute that others outside he and his should receive that very same kind of mercy. He can't relate to their needs, their fears, and failures that put them in the same kind of a place Jonah himself had been, as if they were trapped in a whale too (or big fish, it actually doesn't say whale). All he could relate to is how different they are, all he saw was the sin, the shortcoming, the failure, and thought that justice was demanded and punishment deserved. So instead of a national revival, he wanted a national retribution combined with holier-than-thou gloating when he saw the city destroyed.

Jesus may have had Jonah in mind when he tells the story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21ff. The story very quickly is: the king forgives a massive debt to one servant, who in turn, on his way out the door, refuses to forgive a fellow servant for a very small debt. The forgiven servant probably justified both his debt and his deservingness of the grace that he received. But when the shoe was on the other foot, when he was on other end of a *slight* wrong, all he can understand is the alleged coldness of heart of the fellow servant that deprived him of his due.

For some reason, it makes perfect sense to us to be forgiven for *our* failures, and in the same breath, reserve strict justice (even punishment and revenge) for those who have failed us – or maybe haven't even failed us but simply aren't like us. George Herbert says: "Those who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which they themselves must pass."

Barbara Brown Taylor really captures the challenge here, when she says, "If God is willing to stay with me in spite of my meanness, and my weakness, and my stubborn self-righteousness, then who am I to hold those things against someone else?"

Earlier, I said that Jonah may have run because he was intimidated by God's task of speaking to a radically different group of foreigners. But the author of this story has an additional motive in mind, and it is expressed in Jonah's angry rage at God for saving the city. He *knew* God was merciful and would relent. And that is why he now recalls and justifies his disobedient fanciful flight on a ship, by accusing God -- as if it were a bad thing! -- of being merciful to a *foreign* nation when that blessing should be reserved for me and mine.

The author had held back Jonah's motives for fleeing, to draw the listeners in – and now that he has gotten the reader to the end he blasts Jonah's selfish, exclusive attitude – an attitude that was the popular and shared view of the nation at the time, and probably the primary reason Jonah's story is recorded for us – to show that God is not the God of any select group, but the God of all people.

Jesus told that forgiveness story to explain that we need a change of attitude toward others – we need to learn to accept and have compassion for others who are sinking in the sea of hopelessness – because it is the very same sea in which find ourselves when we have moved in the wrong direction. We need not only to hear it for ourselves, but to live it out for others: that God’s attitude toward Jonah and toward the Ninevites -- his attitude toward *all* people --: is that when we sincerely repent, he gives grace. He forgives. He saves. He recreates us new. And he calls us -- so that even as we ourselves are being restored, we are also invited to participate in the process of reviving not just our personal world, but all God’s world with all of its differences. Returned to our true calling, God spits us out on the shore; and expects us to represent him, to demonstrate with word and deed what Jonah and the Ninevites, and we have experienced -- God's gracious rebuilding of our personal and corporate life.

Prayer Let’s pray...Lord, as we open our hearts to you, you point us to those who have been rattled by circumstances, who are searching for an opportunity, a chance, a need for respite from the pain in their lives: Guide us in bringing to them the message they need. Help us to understand what hope, what healing, what help, what love, what courage, what Word, what justice, what love in action -- that we can bring that person or those people, so that this nation may come a little closer to fulfilling our potential destiny under you. As we answer your call to walk with your grace, gift us with the ability to reveal you glory to others. Help us to perfect our walk with you and with others – if need be, one mulligan -- one do-over at a time.... so that we may be bound together by following you and becoming living examples of your love and forgiveness. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Music Intro Today he calls us to follow, and in so doing, to display his glory and grace to others as he walks with us and leads us all the way.

Music (1,4) Where He Leads Me I Will Follow

Closing Blessing

Know that God’s light has risen upon *you*. So through you, let his light shine into a dark world by rising up to live kingdom values and daring to serve Jesus in new and adventurous ways. Amen