

GOD CALLS A NATION TO CHANGE

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on January 26, 2003
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:6-12; Mark 1:14-20

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Come with me on an imaginative trip to Baghdad. We'll first explore the nearby ruins of the city of Babylon. Then we'll follow the Tigris River North to Mosul. As we approach the city our Arab guide points out two large earthen mounds on the east bank of the Tigris. "The ancient city of Nineveh once stood there. Arabs claim the prophet Jonah is buried there." Our guide gives us a brief history lesson. "Modern day Iraqis are descendants of the Assyrians and Babylonians, two of history's greatest empires. Long before the rise of Europe my ancestors had created a great civilization, invented writing and built architectural monuments that have lasted to this day." She continues, "When this ruined city of Nineveh was in its glory, neighboring nations trembled at our weapons of mass destruction. Some of the most brilliant generals the world has ever known led our armies. We invented siege artillery. No fortified city could withstand our assaults. We had the most advanced weapons of the day but we relied on deception as much as weapons." Our Arab tour guide is absolutely right. The Assyrian empire was built on militarism and cruelty. The prophet Jonah was well aware of Assyria's weapons. Ancient Israel knew about the cruelty of Ashurnasirpal II who punished enemies by flaying them alive and nailing up their skin along the highways. He placed the severed heads of his enemies on city gates. He utterly destroyed captured cities. He was merciless. He cut off the hands and ears and gouged out the eyes of enemies. He burned children alive (Scramuzza, The Ancient World). He wrote on one of his monuments, "In the gratification of my wrath I find contentment."

Within this historical context God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh. Let's briefly review the book of Jonah. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah disobeys and goes by ship in the opposite direction. A storm threatens the lives of all on board. Jonah tells the sailors, "Throw me overboard and the storm will cease." A huge fish swallows Jonah. After three days and nights, the fish spews him out and God calls

Jonah once more to go to Nineveh. He repents, obeys, and goes. Jonah walks through the streets crying, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

This is the part I find hard to believe. The story of Jonah being swallowed by a fish is easy to believe compared to Jonah preaching in the streets of Nineveh. How did he get away with it? How did he avoid getting arrested, tortured and killed. It's hard to believe that the king, a cruel megalomaniac, repented. It's hard to believe that God would forgive the perpetrator of so much mass terror throughout the region. But the book of Jonah claims the king made a proclamation. "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." All of this is hard to believe but the book of Jonah was written to challenge our unbelief. Jonah teaches that no nation, leader, or individual is so evil that they're beyond repentance and salvation. The book of Jonah proclaims that God prefers to show mercy rather than wrath to his enemies. *Assyria was eventually destroyed - but years later.*

God uses pain more than we can

Jonah's experience has been repeated in the history of the church in Iraq. The Bible tells us that

on the day of Pentecost Peter preached in Jerusalem. Among those people who repented and believed were residents of Mesopotamia and Arabs. They returned home sharing the gospel with friends and neighbors. Within three hundred years the majority of Iraqis were professing Christians. Four Arab bishops attended the Council of Nicea in AD 325. The majority of Iraqis remained Christian for hundreds of years after the rise of Islam in the 7th century. Three hundred years after Mohammed, a Moslem writer declared that the majority of Iraqis were *still* Christians. Not until the 13th and 14th century, after the Crusades, did Islam become the predominant religion of Iraq. Some Christians remain in Iraq including five Presbyterian churches. Years ago I went to Synod School at Wilson College. One of the speakers was an Arab Christian by the name of Fuad Bahnen. When I was eating dinner with him I asked, "Were you converted to Christianity by our missionaries?" He looked at me, "My ancestors have been Christians from the day of Pentecost. When your ancestors worshiped trees in Europe my Arab ancestors were worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ." I think my question irritated him.

If Christians made up the majority of Iraqis as late as the 11th and 12th centuries, what happened?
Crusades - western for armies - Killed Arabs + Moslems as well as Jews
To answer that question we have to learn a little something about Mohammed. Mohammed was born in AD 570 and came in contact with Arab Christians. He deeply appreciated Jesus. He believed in Christ's Virgin Birth, his miracles and ascension. He believed Jesus was the greatest of prophets. The Koran calls Jesus the "Word" of God (just like the Gospel of John). Although Mohammed had the utmost respect for Jesus, he claimed most Arab Christians were idolaters and ignorant of basic Christian beliefs. What happened to Jonah happened to these Arab Christians? They got swallowed by a big fish. God called the Church to point people to Christ but they disobeyed and were swallowed up by Islam. The Yale historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, writes of Iraqi Christians in the time of Mohammed, "More and more the church became *assimilated* and *conformed* to the world, church discipline grew *lax*, and moral decay made rapid progress." Samuel Zwemer, one of the foremost missionaries to the Moslems of the Arabian peninsula, wrote, "Had that early Christianity been *gold* instead of *glitter* it would not have perished so easily in the furnace of persecution or disappeared so utterly before the tornado-blast of Islam."

Let this story from the distant past be a lesson for us as we look towards the future. John Mackay once said, "The road to tomorrow leads through yesterday." The story of Jonah tells us that before we can expect Saddam Hussein to repent, we, the Church, must repent. Before Nineveh repented, Jonah had to repent. The book of Jonah is the story of repentance. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. He didn't want Nineveh to be spared. Jonah was waiting with great anticipation for Nineveh's destruction. But Jonah repented. Repentance means "turning around" – stop doing things the way we've been doing them and do something more constructive. When Jonah repented and obeyed God, he undertook the dangerous task of going to Nineveh to preach God's word, and, incredibly, Nineveh repented.

We American Christians must repent. We are Jonah in our approach to Iraq. What have we done and failed to do to have earned such animosity from the Arab world? When Arabs think of Christian America they see a greedy, decadent people. They think of Christian America as the pornography and crime capital of the world. They see us as a people obsessed with drugs, alcohol, and addicted to power.

We are Jonah! We've resisted God's call and are being swallowed up by our materialistic consumer culture that *appears* to benefit the rich at the expense of the poor people of the world. Many Christians are indistinguishable from our culture. Our lifestyles and values are no different. In fact, Christians with distinctive lifestyles come across to many of us as being weird. What distinguishes us as Christians? If we were arrested for being Christians would there be enough evidence to convict us? Are our aspirations as Christians any different from non-churched people? Many Christians don't know the Bible any better than un-churched neighbors. The Christian disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, family devotions, tithing, and regular and disciplined attendance at worship have all but disappeared. Christ's love for the poor, diseased, dispossessed and outcast is largely absent. Our affluent, materialistic, pleasure seeking, instant gratification, consumer-oriented culture is swallowing us up.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

God calls us to repent and believe the gospel as he called Jonah to repent. The Gospel is the most ~~powerful force in the world~~ more powerful than nuclear weapons. The most violent leaders may repent by God's grace and believe the gospel. Take Jesus at his word. Believe the good news that God is the kind of God that Jesus told us about. God so loves the *world* that he will make any sacrifice and bear any burden to bring nations, peoples, leaders and individuals to himself. "Follow me," Jesus says. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." We have a choice. A fish can swallow us, as it did Jonah, or we can become fishers. If we repent and pray, even from the belly of the fish, God will deliver us and, like Jesus, raise us from the dead and make us fishers. And who knows? Who *really* knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that neither Iraq or America need perish.

Loving Creator, we know you command us to love our enemies but do you really mean for us to love the people of Iraq? What if their leader is plotting to attack us? What if our government thinks they are the enemy? Our questions sometimes confound us and we lose courage to try to sort all of this out. We often decide you'd rather destroy than to save. We try to convince ourselves that you didn't really mean what you said about loving our enemies. Forgive us for the ways we make your word irrelevant, forgive us for our lack of courage and lack of imagination in how to love our enemies. Help us to follow your command to love our neighbors and our enemies. Amen.