

Can You Hear Me Now? Jonah 3: 1-10

When was the last time you were asked to do something you really did not want to do? Maybe it was something unpleasant like plunging a clogged toilet or cleaning up someone's mess or being asked to do something that might make us uncomfortable spiritually or emotionally. It might be praying out loud, or sharing the gospel with a stranger, or asking for forgiveness. A modern way of describing it is having to do something that takes us out of our comfort zone. For some of us, our comfort zone is the living room sofa or the La-Z Boy recliner in the family room, or that place in front of the television or electronic device that enables us to obtain the latest news, the latest scores or perhaps even the most intimate details of someone's life. We will soon see that our comfort zone can also be an unsound understanding of God and grace.

We are creatures of habit and quite content to find a path that is both comfortable and familiar to us. It matters not whether it is in the workplace, at home or in a social setting, when someone or something gets in the way of our normal routine or long held beliefs, we become unhappy.

We like being comfortable with ourselves. We are comfortable parking in the same parking spot and sitting in the same pew or the same couch on Sunday morning. We are comfortable singing the same 15 or 20 familiar hymns we always sing, and we want to be reassured that we will finish singing the last stanza of the closing hymn by 10:55 or even 10:45. And when we find a stranger sitting in "our" pew or discover that an unfamiliar hymn is listed in the bulletin or discover that the morning message will be delivered by a guest preacher we begin to squirm. When we are asked to do or consider something that is either unfamiliar or new, most of us will admit that we are out of our comfort zone.

When people gather in fellowship, we typically choose a seat near someone we know. Few things are more unsettling than walking into a roomful of people and finding that you do not know a soul. Perhaps the only thing worse is being forced to sit next to someone you know but don't like.

When we believe our free will to make choices is infringed upon, we soon find ourselves outside of our comfort zone. And the unease, grumbling and complaining that often follow are the result of something much deeper than our being placed in an uncomfortable situation. Simply put, few of us enjoy being challenged or told what to do.

Jonah was not one of those few. One of the amazing things about the Scriptures that make them so trustworthy is that the characters and events recorded on its pages have not been “cleaned up” to make them more appealing. The Bible was not written with political correctness or cancel culture in mind. The fact of the matter is that Jonah is not our best Biblical role model. Although a quick glance at chapter 3 might have us believe that Jonah was a willing and obedient prophet, the other 3 chapters in this short and revealing book present a different picture. However, there are some powerful things we can learn both about God and ourselves through his experiences.

One may be found in verse 1: the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. **God never forgets about us, no matter how far we stray.** Isn't it good to know that the God we love and serve is a God of grace and second chances? Allow me to refresh your memory as to what happened to Jonah the first time around. 1:1-3: This was no mysterious dream that had to be interpreted. God's command to Jonah was clear. Go to Nineveh and cry out against it.

Jonah refused. To fully appreciate his response, we need to look at a map of the area. God told him to go east to Nineveh. Historians tell us that Nineveh was the largest city in the world at the time. It was the capital of Assyria, known for immoral and idolatrous people. The Ninevites were Gentiles. They looked different than Jonah did, they spoke a different language than Jonah did, they ate different foods than Jonah did, and above all else they did not worship like Jonah did. To make matters worse, even though Nineveh was a great city, it was a city filled with wickedness. Reading between the lines we might conclude that Jonah did not really care to reach people who did not look like him, talk like him, smell like him or worship like him. He was quite content to let them perish in their sins. In his mind they were swine unworthy of pearls of wisdom. Certainly, there were better places to send an evangelist. God's command took Jonah out of his comfort zone, so he headed west to the city of Tarshish, the exact opposite of where God told him to go.

Who could blame him for not wanting to go? God! Even so, God did not give up on him or the Ninevites. They would get a second chance. When Jonah said no, plan B went into effect. Voluntarily tossed from a ship into the sea, preferring to die than listen to God, Jonah is just a few seconds away from drowning when total fear and panic set in. 2:7- *When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord. And my prayer went up to you into your holy temple.* He was at the edge of despair when Jonah remembered the Lord- and the Lord remembered Jonah. Jonah, can you hear me now? Talk about being out of his comfort zone. God never forgets about us, no matter how far we stray.

The second lesson we learn from Jonah is this: **our faith in God helps us do the things we find uncomfortable.** Whether we are there by choice or circumstance, it is our faith and our trust in God that will bring us through it. But rather than pray to return to our comfort zone it is better to ask for grace to learn to be uncomfortable. Jesus' letter to the church of the Laodiceans comes to mind. I know your works- you are neither hot nor cold. You are lukewarm- in other words you are swimming in comfortable waters. You do not want to rock the boat, you don't want to risk offending somebody with the message of the Gospel, you don't want to speak out against wickedness and evil - and because you are lukewarm, I will vomit you out of my mouth.

Don't you find it quite a coincidence that the same language is used in the book of Jonah where the great fish literally pukes Jonah onto dry land? Jonah's unsound understanding of God's love and grace required God to take him out of his comfort zone. The Ninevites were deserving of God's love, even if Jonah thought otherwise. For Jonah, it took three days in the belly of a fish and a near death experience to get his attention. Hopefully, such drastic measures will not be required for us to hear God and recognize the blessings we have been missing.

Speaking of drastic, the message Jonah delivered to the Ninevites fits the definition. 3:4- forty days and this city will be overthrown. God could have wiped Nineveh from the face of the earth, like Sodom and Gomorrah. But like Jonah, the Ninevites were given an opportunity to repent. Whether it was out of fear or grace the people of Nineveh responded. Notice who the people believed. It was God- not Jonah.

Another thing we can learn from Jonah is this: **God's will is accomplished- and always will be accomplished - regardless of human cooperation.** God pours out His grace even through the most reluctant of prophets. Although God gives us free will and the ability to make choices in life, thankfully they are not absolute. The will of Jonah was for the Ninevites to perish. The will of God was for the Ninevites to have an opportunity to repent and escape judgment. Jonah could have spared himself a lot of misery if he had listened to God the first time. There is a lesson for us there as well. The book of Jonah ends without us knowing if he ever truly gave in to God. My prayer is that someday we will find out.

As with Jonah, there may be times in our lives when prejudice, hatred or some other kind of sin might be standing in the way of our obedience to God. There may be times when we are too comfortable- too lukewarm- for us to take some risks and grow in our faith. But be not discouraged, for it is then that God might do for us what He did for Jonah and put His amazing grace on display for us to see. **God never forgets about us, no matter how far we stray.**

Will you pray with me? God, compel us to leave our places of comfort and our so your will to be done- have us grow nearer and closer to You as you conform our will to Your will in the process. Amen