

# Third Sunday after the Epiphany

## Nineveh Repents, God Relents

Jonah 3:1-5, (6-9) 10

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## Analysis by Dana Bjorlin

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

[6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”]

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

*What irony for the lectionary this week to have as the Old Testament text a portion of the book of Jonah-plucked by God from the belly of a fish-when the Gospel reading has Jesus invite Simon and Andrew to follow him and “fish for people!” Since this prophetic book is named after Jonah and he is the main human character throughout the narrative, it is tempting to focus on him. However, a main theme of the Epiphany season is Christ’s manifestation to the nations, making it therefore a time to emphasize world missions. In chapter 3 we encounter those in the world to whom Jonah was called to bring God’s mission, and this makes Nineveh itself the main “human character” of this week’s text. Since the focus here seems to be on Nineveh, it seemed appropriate to look at this text as a news reporter might and let reportorial-type questions guide us in its analysis.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Jonah’s Mission**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Who?**

Those who identify Jonah with an “historical” prophet from 2 Kings 14 might be able to see the problem he would have had with going to Nineveh. The great city (v. 2) was the capital of Assyria, the main rival to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during its geopolitical revival under Jeroboam II, and which would one day conquer the North and deport its people into virtual ethnic extinction. Survivors of the Southern Kingdom of Judah’s own deportation into exile-several hundred years later-could also relate to Jonah’s initial objection to preaching to such a people of wickedness, violence and evil ways (v. 8 & ch. 1:2). James Limburg observes, “It is quite understandable that an Israelite prophet would be reluctant to accept a mission to that city. It would be as if a Jew who had lost family in the Holocaust were asked to undertake a mission to Germany just

after the Nazi period” (p. 140, Hosea–Micah in the Interpretation Series of commentaries (c) 1988 John Knox Press). Although neither our text, nor the opening chapter mention it, it’s easy to hear Jonah object, “Who do you want me to go to?”

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *What?***

Jonah is told to proclaim God’s message (v. 2). Up to this point all we have heard of this message are things like “cry against [the city]” (ch. 1:2), “[it] shall be overthrown” (v. 4), “[the people could] perish” (v. 9).” Jonah had such revulsion for these people. Yet look how diligently he must have declared this message of doom: he starts having success after one day of what looks like a three day trek (v. 4). We can only imagine the fear this message raised among the populace. Their alarm is unequivocal. Their reaction is much in keeping with the prophet Joel’s encouragement to gather the aged, the children, and infants at the breast for a solemn assembly (Joel 2:16). The mention of sackcloth and ashes seals the deal (vv. 5-6). They know they have sinned and they are sorry.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Why?***

The Ninevites get it. They know that if they don’t change, all the things that were predicted will happen: calamity, perishing, overthrow. The king notes it rightly: the ways this city and people have been operating has provoked God’s fierce anger and God will make them perish. But even in their state of repentance, the people of Nineveh and their king say, “Who knows?” (v. 9). Who knows if this show of sorrow and repentance will be enough? And note this irony: an “historical” Jonah doesn’t get it-although prophets for generations (for example Hosea, Amos, Elijah, and Elisha) had been trying to warn Israel of their own path to destruction; nor do latter-day survivors from Jerusalem and Judah get why their treatment of their neighbors and half-Hebrew kin resemble the wickedness, violence, and evil ways of the Ninevites.

*[Note: thus far I've gingerly given room for this text as an historical account for the ancient people of Israel and/ or Judah. Most scholars, however, treat the Book of Jonah as something more closely resembling a parable. If it is (like) a parable, then its points have the possibility of getting somewhat more prickly. When David denounced the rich man in the parable of the Poor Man with the Ewe Lamb (2 Samuel 12), Nathan quickly turned to him saying, "You are (that) man!" When reading parables or holy history, it's important to realize that often the texts likewise can turn on us, exposing us as people of wickedness, violence and evil ways, who likewise deserve God's punishment. Will we get it?]*

## **PROGNOSIS: God's Mission**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : When?**

Jonah predicted Nineveh's overthrow in 40 days (v. 4). And happily, God relents from the punishment described. But this relenting happens on God's time table and not that described by Jonah. "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son... born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that (they) might receive adoption as children [of God]" (Galatians 4:4-6). Like the king of Nineveh taking off his royal robes, Jesus divests himself of his godhood and deems to sit in the ashes with his human family. In Matthew 12 Jesus talks about the sign of Jonah, relating his own time in the grave to Jonah's time in the belly of fish. Jonah's time in the fish seemed to be needed to bring him to the point of resuming his prophetic call, but much more, Jesus' death and resurrection serve to bring about the overthrow of all sin and to manifest the God's power over death and life.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : How?**

Yet if Jesus has won a victory over sin, over evil, over wickedness and violence, it remains to be seen how those who

need to know this joyous news will hear it. It seems clear as we read of Jonah, that God chooses people to get out his message. God even seeks out Jonah and gives him a second chance (v. 1) to be his messenger. Such an unlikely messenger, unless you count the fishermen in the Gospel for this week. But these are not all. In Acts 1, Jesus makes it clear that we all are called to go like Jonah, despite our own reluctance. And, by the Holy Spirit's power, we hear Jesus' call: you are to "be my witnesses."

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Where?***

The above verse continues: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Yes, that may include the Nineveh's of our day: the enemies of our nation (e.g. Iran, N. Korea, Cuba); our personal enemies (the gal or guy who got the promotion we needed); those ignorant Republicans or unrealistic Democrats across the street; or all those people who are so unlike us. (See

also <https://crossings.org/theology/2011/theolo853.shtml> for a description of what "all" those people may be like.) But again, if we can see that we are among those who didn't deserve God's freeing message in the first place, how can we but volunteer to go?