**Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,**

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Do you remember the first time you ever had your favorite food? If you are like me, the first time you tasted it you probably had a physical reaction to eating it as you enjoyed the taste, the flavor, the texture of it. You probably felt at that time like you could eat it forever and you would never get sick of it. But maybe you have had it many times since then, and while you still enjoy it, you still would call it your favorite food, it lacks the same experience you had the first time you tasted it.

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I believe that we as Christians can have the same attitude when it comes to the mercy and grace of God that is shown to sinful men. Because we see ourselves as born into it, or we simply have a skeptical attitude, we sometimes have a “cool, that’s good, I guess” type of attitude when people come to Christ. That attitude can be even more apparent when we read about it happening a few thousand years ago to a people we don’t really think we have that much in common with. As we look at the 3rd chapter of Jonah today, I hope that we can again be like little children on Christmas morning, as we stare in awe and wonder at the gift that has been given not only to us as the children of God here in Lynwood IL, but also as we see the great power and might of our God as His great mercy is recorded for us by the Prophet Jonah.

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As we look at this chapter this morning, our theme is God’s overwhelming mercy is shown again to the most unlikely of people.

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1. Jonah recommissioned and encouraged

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2. Nineveh and the Great Revival

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3. The Mercy and Grace of God

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Reading chapter 3 of Jonah, we start with the exact same four words in Hebrew that started chapter 1, the words we translate as "The word of the LORD came to Jonah". Jonah is getting a fresh start, with the same responsibilities that he tried to run away from in the first chapter of the book. After his prophet, the one who knows that his job in life is to bring the word of God when he is called to do so, after that man openly rebels and has to be swallowed by a fish to bring get him to turn back to God, he is given the exact same job of bringing the message of God to the Ninevites. This time God makes it perfectly clear to Jonah, that he will bring to them the message that God has planned for him.

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You see, God doesn’t have the fish spit out Jonah and tell Jonah to go home. God doesn’t lay on Jonah a heavier burden than before and tell him how disappointed he is. God doesn’t harm a hair on Jonah’s head. God simply tells Jonah again to go and I will go with you, I’m going to tell you the message that you have to bring. God the Father is gracious towards Jonah and brings him back into his service, and not only does God bring him back, but He promises to give Jonah the words to speak. It reminds me of Jesus’ words to his apostles to encourage them when facing hostile crowds and rulers, that they are not to worry, the Holy Spirit the comforter, will give them the words to speak. So here too, God seeks to comfort and encourage Jonah by telling him that the message he must bring, will be provided for him.

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God, it seems, is giving Jonah every reason to trust in Him, having shown Jonah His power in control of all creation, the storm and the great fish, and His ability to turn the hearts of the sailors to faith and repentance. Now God comes after Jonah again and says go, and I will give you the words to speak. This is the same as the first message from God that Jonah recieved. But this time, God phrases it in a more encouraging way for Jonah. There isn’t mention of the Ninevite wickedness, but instead, the command to cry out is actually even a softer word, less of an “against” and instead just to Nineveh. The LORD it seems through the words of the charge, is trying to encourage Jonah that the task is not so daunting as he might think. The LORD will give him the message, and the message will be to the city, not against it. He is told that Nineveh is a great city, but the original Hebrew has a double meaning of not only a great city, but a great city “to God”. God has called Jonah personally, he has been told that the message he must bring will be given to him by God, and the people he is to bring it to are important to God.

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Pause with me and see the grace of our God towards Jonah. God has followed Jonah, it seems, as Jonah has made an absolute mess of things. God has allowed for Jonah to seek his own kingdom first, and put his own will before the will of God, and our God has been patient, and has through trials and hardships, brought about by Jonah’s disobedience, turned Jonah back. As we look at the first two verses of chapter 3 do we see that? God says, in His commissioning of Jonah, nothing of his disobedience, it’s as if it doesn’t even exist, and he is placed back into God’s service despite his sin-stained past.

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This is patience and mercy that I hope we don’t miss. This is God’s patience on full display with stubborn and rebellious people, such Israel at the time. Such as us. We who daily transgress his commandments. We are the ones who are presented time and again with the opportunity to bring the gospel and we shirk that responsibility. Not wanting to offend anyone, or make things uncomfortable we hide our light under a bushel and just go with the flow. We have been given the full council of God, given the promise of eternal salvation in Christ, given the free pass, as it were, that we don’t even have to earn our salvation by winning over the lost. We just have to present the gospel, and allow the Holy Spirit to work the increase if He sees fit. But we fail to do so. We like Jonah, sometimes aren’t comfortable with the thought of God’s grace being extended to just anyone so we refuse.

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Thanks be to God, that we are forgiven for our shortcomings and failures in Christ. That he comes to us again and again in mercy and in patience saying as it were, “arise, go again, go to your neighbor, go to your co-worker, go to your family member, they are important to Me”. I pray that you desire the working of the Holy Spirit in your hearts, as I do, that we would be convicted and restored, that we would desire more and more to serve him out of thankfulness for the regenerating power of the Spirit. The power of the Spirit that is able to give us the boldness that we can find all throughout the Bible. Moses before Pharaoh, Daniel’s three friends before Nebuchadnezzar, the apostles before the sanhedrin, and the list could go on. The point is that we have plenty of examples to look to, if we are only willing to trust in the Power of the Spirit. He will give us the words to speak, He is the one who is working within us and strengthening us for the task ahead.

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That doesn’t mean that we are now perfect all of a sudden, that we no longer have doubts and struggles. But it does mean that we are given the strength to overcome those doubts and fears, because Christ has made full payment for our sins, even the ones we have yet to commit, and we are seen by God as clothed in His righteousness, free from the stain of sin, and called into joyful service in his kingdom. So I ask you this morning, do you see yourself as Jonah here? One who has been forgiven in Christ? Do you see His work on your behalf, and do you respond in faithful obedience? Do we see the great love with which Jonah is loved, the great with which you are loved? People of God, I pray you do. I pray that the grace of God that is present in all of our lives, is recognized by you, and through the power of the Spirit you respond to that free gift of grace with lives of grateful service for the commissioning that we have as well to serve in God’s kingdom.

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The great news is that Jonah, now properly focused on God, responds appropriately to the charge of God. The text says that he goes to the great city according to the word of the LORD. Although Jonah’s heart and motive aren’t described for us, we see that he is obedient and he goes. As if to remind us of the great task that is ahead of Jonah, the text states that Nineveh was a city that would take 3 days for him to travel throughout it. As if to avoid the temptation to quit or keep silent from fear, it says that Jonah began immediately to preach the message God had given him.

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What we receive from the text, is that Jonah pronounces what appears to be judgement on the city of Nineveh. Growing up, I recall reading that Nineveh would be destroyed! But what I found while preparing was that the word that we translate here as “overthrown”, is actually a word also used in the context of transformation. It can have the connotation of turning around, changing, or turning over. In

[Psalm 66](https://ref.ly/logosref/bible%242Besv.19.66)

, the same verb is used when it talks of the Lord turning the sea into dry ground, and in multiple locations in the books of 1 and 2nd Kings, and 2 Chronicles, it is used to describe the turning of a chariot in the opposite direction.

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It’s actually very beautiful to see that the message that the LORD commands Jonah to bring to the Ninevites, is that they must either completely overturn their way of life, by turning to God, (this would be a good overturning) or else they will be overthrown by God (a very bad overturning). This is the same message that we are charged with bringing to a world that seems to be very similar to Nineveh. A world that is filled with all forms of evil and wickedness. The call of the Gospel is not just a call to add Jesus to your lifestyle, and then it will be better for you. The call of the Gospel is that everything must be forsaken for the sake of following Christ. Every part of our life, comes under the Lordship of Christ, and what we say, what we do, how we act, all of it is to come into submission to Him. This isn’t an easy thing to say to anyone, we don’t even like to hear it ourselves, but that is the call of the Gospel, and that is what Jonah brings to the Ninevites. A hard message of turning their lives completely upside around, or else facing the just and righteous punishment of God.

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This is the message that Jonah brings to Nineveh on his first day in town, and we are shown immediately what the Holy Spirit is able to accomplish. As we move into our second point, verses 5-9, we see the greatest revival the world has ever seen. The text says that Jonah only needed to preach for one day, and the Ninevites believed God. The people of the city, from the greatest to the least, proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth. This isn’t just an outward pious, knee jerk reaction because the Ninevites were worried about being overthrown. The text says that they heard the word of the Lord and they believed. Not only did they hear it and receive it, the Spirit worked in the hearts convicting them of their sins and they repented, turning to God in sackcloth in order to show their humility and hatred for their sin.

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Children, have you ever held or seen an old potato sack? It’s made from rough fibers that are woven together that are strong, but they aren’t smooth or nice. That’s likely about the closest thing we have to what they would call sackcloth, and by wearing it the people were subjecting themselves to itchy and scratchy discomfort no matter what they were doing. Whether you would be sitting, standing, sleeping, working, any movement would be irritating and uncomfortable. This was what they would wear and by doing so, they were taking away any comfort and reminding themselves of the punishment they were deserving of because of their sin. They are reminding themselves that they are sinners, and they don’t deserve even the most basic of blessings like regular clothes. On top of that, they proclaimed a fast, depriving themselves of food that they realized was a gift from God that they were undeserving of.

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As we look at the amazing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Ninevites, causing them to hate their sins and repent of them with such agony and shame, quite frankly it makes me ashamed of the little thought I give to my sins. Far from acting like the Ninevites in hating my sin and repenting in sackcloth and fasting, I am far more like Jonah, content with the circle of believers I live around and not very excited about the prospect of facing my own rebellious heart or sharing the gospel with others. If we were to look the New Testament, I’m afraid that I would find myself with the Pharisee, standing boldly in the temple and proclaiming how much better I am than everyone else; when in reality I should be standing far off with the publican, pounding on my chest crying “God have mercy on me, a sinner”.

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Christ said that in the judgement, the men of Nineveh would rise up in judgement against the generation of pharisees, and the same will likely be said about our generation today. We live in a world were we have without doubt or question the greatest access to the Word of God and more preachers and teachers of it than ever before. One greater than Jonah has come and He died for our sins, bringing us into union and communion with the Father. Yet we wink at sin and we instead call rebellion against God poor choices, or “sowing our wild oats”, or bad decisions. Consider the Ninevites, whose very King, one of the most powerful rulers of the ancient world, stepped down from his throne, removed the royal robes that he wore, the symbols of his might and power, and joined with his subjects by donning sackcloth and sitting in ashes. By doing so, acknowledging that he is nothing, he is undeserving of the power that he wields and he is repentant for the sins that he has committed or tolerated during his rule. Can we imagine a ruler in our day and age humbling himself before Almighty God like that? Can we imagine ourselves being humbled enough under the recognition of our sins, in order to act like that?

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This is almost too much to believe, and it doesn’t even stop there. The king and his nobles declare that men and beast are to refrain from eating or drinking, even the animals are to be clothed in sackcloth, and all of them are to cry out mightily to God. Imagine the incredible amount of noise that would come from the city of Nineveh. I don’t know how many of you are familiar with livestock, but I know that if cows don’t have feed and water, they make a whole lot of noise. Now add in the noise of the sheep, goats, donkeys, horses, and the wailing of children and you can begin to understand the serious view that the people were taking of their sin against God. Then, as if the cherry on top, the king commands that all evil and violence is to be stopped and turned from, which if we remember the historical description of Nineveh, is a big deal. This is a nation that has bragged about their debauchery and cruel violence to the extent that it has been engraved into the halls of buildings to commemorate the horrible things they have done to people.

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One day. One day of faithfully bringing the message of the Lord, and the Holy Spirit has worked an entire overthrow of the city of Nineveh. A city of rebellious, violent pagans, have turned to the only True Living God in a show of repentance and sorrow over sin that I would argue is unmatched anywhere in Scripture. So I ask you this morning, what do you expect when you come to church on Sunday to hear the Word of God proclaimed? Do we come to church and pray that the Holy Spirit would work in our hearts through the preaching of the Word to convict us of our sins, show us our salvation in Christ alone, and work in us to make us more and more like Christ? Do we actually believe that He can do that? Do we actually want that? Do we hunger and thirst after righteousness? Can we say with the psalmist in

[Psalm 42:1-4](https://ref.ly/logosref/bible%242Besv.19.42.1-19.42.4)

“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival.” This is what happened to the Ninevites. They heard the preaching of the Word of God and they were essentially undone.

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As we come to final verse of chapter 3, and we see the mercy of our God as he forgives the Ninevites and turns from destruction, what thoughts enter into our mind? I entitled this point “the mercy of God on display again”, and I honestly had the thought to myself that it was the most general, bland title I could have given it. But then I realized, has it really come to that? Is the mercy of God boring and not worthy of our attention and praise? Have we come to throne of God, unworthy sinners and rebellious sons and daughters, and received bread and water without money and without cost, have we done that so many times that it could get old? Have we lost sight of the free grace and love that is shown to us every day that we wake up as a child of God, adopted in Christ, and we now take it for granted? Does it no longer amaze us? It can happen to us, can’t it. We can become again like Jonah, indifferent to the path of damnation that the world is walking down, content to remain in our happy little reformed bubble, and we simply ignore the world, refusing to reach out with the free offer of the gospel.

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I pray that if you find yourself in that state today, that the Spirit will shake you out of your stupor to see God’s grace and mercy for what it is. A gift of indescribable worth, that was given to unworthy sinners. Our God didn’t just give to us the minimum amount necessary, but He gave His only Begotten Son. That worthless, rebellious sinners, like the Ninevites, like Jonah, like you and like me, could be welcomed into the family of God as if we had never sinned. Although we hate our sins as the Spirit works new life into our hearts, we no longer have to repent in sack cloth and ashes to pray that the anger of God would be diverted from consuming us. We now live our lives before the face of God, pleading the blood of Christ on our behalf. The greater than Jonah has come, not just one who warned of the judgement to come, but one who took upon himself that punishment in order that we would be delivered from it eternally. Out of that great gift of grace we are called to live. Not lives of somber service, doing what we have to because God said so. But lives that are marked by a joyful service to Christ and His kingdom for work that was done on our behalf, lives that are willing to go to all peoples, tongues, and nations to proclaim that salvation is found in the name of Christ.

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WE do so, not because we want to be like Jonah, but we seek to follow in the footsteps of the greater Jonah. To taste and see again that God is good, and to be renewed every day with the reminder that we have been saved by grace, through faith in Christ Jesus, and our lives will forever reflect thankfulness for that Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. AMEN.