

### Call to Worship

There is one God, one Creator, one Savior of humankind.

**God makes no distinctions, but extends love and mercy toward all.**

Let us worship the Maker of heaven and earth; let us praise God, who holds the whole world in balance,  
**who gives life to all creatures, who heals and renews our souls.**

### Prayer of Invocation

**God of change, God of a new season, we see at last that we can no longer live according to the ways of the world. As we turn our minds around, and celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ, abide with us. May we proclaim with new fire the precious message with which you have entrusted us! Let this be so! Amen.**

### The Word                      Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (NRSV)

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

**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.**

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

**And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 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.**

### Living the Word

A preacher steps behind the pulpit and gives a rip-roaring sermon. Everyone says, "Ah, Reverend, thank you very much. That was wonderful." The next week, the preacher gets behind the pulpit and gives the same sermon.

This time, people are a little less enthusiastic, but they say it was still pretty good and the preacher did tell that story a little better than last week. The third week, the preacher gets up and presents the same sermon yet again. Finally, one of the church leaders takes the preacher aside and says, 'Reverend, you've given this same sermon three times. We're getting a little tired of it. Why are you doing this?' "Well," said the preacher, "there's no evidence you've been hearing me."

This is the third week of Epiphany, and like the wise men who made a journey to worship a child, Jonah heeded God's call to go to a foreign city. But unlike the wise men from the East, Jonah initially resisted and rebelled against God's call to go to Nineveh. Jonah decided what he wanted to listen to from God and what he wanted to defy and ignore. He had selective hearing.

Sometimes we have selective hearing, which includes reading into the scriptures what we want to hear out of them. Ignoring what we don't want to know, and even defying God on some things. As a small example, each

week we read only a few verses of the stories, because we only have so much time. If we all knew the Bible well enough to recognize the placement of those few verses in the whole story it wouldn't be so bad, but because most of us only get bits and pieces – we only get part of the story.

Did you know that there are three stories in the book of Jonah? Even so, it is only four chapters long. I am not going to have us read all four chapters through now, but I will give you a short outline of each of the three stories, and I know you will want to pick up your Bible and read them more thoroughly later.

### Story One - Jonah & the Whale

A few summers ago at Vacation Bible School, one of the stories was Jonah and the whale. The children were invited into an huge plastic room, which had been cleverly made out of large tablecloths or something and had a fan blowing in to air movement – it was really hot that week. They were then asked how they felt in the belly of a whale. They were told that Jonah prayed in there and they prayed.

Most of us learned this as a children's story. The children learn about Jonah and how he tried to run from God. They learn that they can't hide anything from God. When they do something wrong, instead of trying to forget about it, or hiding from it, God wants them to tell about it, and to ask God for forgiveness.

There is much more to this, the first of Jonah's stories:

- Jonah's was given what he thought was an impossible assignment - to go to the Gentile people of Ninevah with God's message for them to 'change or die.'
- He runs the other way – as if to run from God.
- As the ship is set into a raging storm Jonah hides, then eventually takes the blame and tells the sailors to throw him overboard.
- Hardened sailors repent because of him and their fear of his God. They do everything to lighten their load in the storm so as not to upset Jonah's God. Finally, as a last choice, they throw Jonah overboard.
- God calms the sea. Jonah faces death, but is saved by an unlikely character – a big fish.
- Jonah sits in the belly of the Fish and prays. But he prays with pleading & blaming. He is not terribly sincere.
- Even so God answers his prayer. The fish spews Jonah back onto the land.

This is a story of human actions and God's divine will. After trying to save his life by running away, Jonah now is willing to lose his life to save a boat full of men who don't even worship Jonah's God; a ship's crew who have different gods and beliefs, but recognize the importance of Jonah's God and beg forgiveness before they throw him off the ship. God hears their cries and immediately calms the sea. Then God saves Jonah from certain death by providing a big fish to hold him safe for a few days of contemplation. God persists and prevails with Jonah.

Remember last week how persistent God was at calling Samuel? Jonah's story shows even more persistence from God. The faithfulness of God continues to be seen in how Jonah is addressed by the circumstances. Jonah can't begin to anticipate what will happen next.

### Story Two - Jonah faces the unknown in the task before him

- God makes the second call for Jonah's assignment
- Go to Ninevah – known to be a vile community by the outsider, but he goes.
- It is also a huge place - 3 days walk – about 60 miles to cover all its neighborhoods by walking and announcing as he went.

- One short statement: *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* – No hope and no promise for them.
- Jonah expects destruction in 40 days.
- But the city of Ninevah repents, everyone even the King. Everyone fasted from food including the animals.
- God measures the repentance and doesn't destruct Ninevah
- Jonah thinks he is the only loser in this deal.
- Jonah disappointed with his successful mission to save Ninevah!

Jonah, whose name is the Jewish name Noah backwards, thinks it will be like the flood story. Forty days and God will destroy again...God changes the plan for destruction of this huge, vile city and extends forgiveness to the repentant people Well, don't we just hate when non-Christians or less faithful church goers act more Christian than us?

What about us? What is our attitude toward people we don't know, that are different? Do we avoid them, or show them Christ's face? Do we blame God when things don't go how we think they should? Do we ever have unrighteous jealousy toward others?

God loves all humans, not just Jews or Christians. Jonah can see his own deliverance from the belly of the fish, but he can't grasp the deliverance of these foreign people. Aren't we good at pointing toward others we think need the God we already have, when they already have our God, and may or may not be in a different place of their life journey and understanding than we are?

### Story Three –

- Jonah got angry with God for changing his mind about destroying Ninevah.
- Once again he is pleading and blaming.
- God asks if it is right for Jonah to be angry? What do you think? Lets do a poll right now: Give me a thumbs up or thumbs down. How many think Jonah has a right to be angry? How many think that God has a right to be disappointed in Jonah?
- Jonah goes to sit in the shade, under a bush that God has placed there for his comfort.
- The next day the bush becomes diseased and dies.
- Jonah once again is angry and blaming God because of the death of the bush.
- Verse 10 & 11 - Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.<sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Jonah, worried about how these turn of events made him look, begrudge the Ninevites' official pardon by God. He then says "I could just die! Just let me die." Poor Jonah. Just ask him and he will tell you: 'Poor Me.' God tells Jonah to trust God to handle things. The whole book is about Jonah's choices and God's choices; the Human mind versus God's thoughts. Do we trust God enough to weather the storms and courageously go when and where God calls us?

"Gosh God, I'd like to help but I'm going this way not that way."

"Golly God, I will go to those people but they won't listen, and you will do what you will do to them anyway."

"Well God, you've made me look like a stooge, foretelling what now seems like nonsense."

Could God's plan be bigger than just you? When we try to figure it all out we are selectively seeing with our limited vision. When we limit what God can do, it is selective hearing.

All through the Bible faithfulness is shown in how the people responded to God. Abram and Sarai hear God's call and go; some fishermen hear an invitation and they drop their nets and go. Ironically, this story of Jonah is of an insider – one who should know the heart of God, who is reluctant and resistant to go, while the Gentiles on the ship and in a foreign city are ready to respond immediately to God's power.

The people of Ninevah heard God's voice in the words of Jonah and they repented. But Jonah had a hard time hearing God voice for himself. God paves the way for our good work but we have to be willing to listen for all of the directions without knowing the final outcome.

When my boys arrived at the teenage stages of life, there were desperate times that called for desperate measures when I finally pulled out the biggest control weapon I had to use on them. When they said but why do I have to...my dramatic response would be: "Because I'm the Mom and I say so." It wasn't very productive for them or me, and usually only caused more resentment toward the situation.

God doesn't force us. We are given the opportunities to plead and blame. We are given the choices of how we will act, though because God knows best, our Creator has the right answers for us. Who knows the ways of this strange God who rules over land and sea, animals and humans, who inspires greatness in us through the Holy Spirit, who has sent his Son to show us how merciful and loving our Creator can be.

I have discovered over my years of ministry that a Pastor's job is to try to see the big picture, with every committee and work team in mind at each meeting. I don't believe it is to tell anyone what to do, but to resource and guide for wise decisions. My first District Superintendent told my first church in my presence, that my job was to equip, enable and empower the laity to be the church. This means that you can make the final decisions, but I ask you to trust me, when I suggest something to be considered in your decision making. In turn I will try to trust God along with you as we do ministry together.

God can see a bigger picture. God could destroy us like a shrub, but God doesn't do that. The shrubs may come and go, but we are always given another chance with God. God's mercy is present with us whichever way we go. As humans who are not perfect, one day we follow – the next day we question and turn another way; we judge and condemn; we repent or justify our actions; and God, through Christ's sacrifice keeps forgiving and loving us.

Often it is difficult for us to see beyond ourselves. Do you know where the ancient city of Ninevah is located? In the northern part of Iraq. Does that stir some reaction of some sort in you? Can we love even these? If God really loves all people and plans to save all people, shouldn't we be willing to get to know those we are afraid of because they are different?

Christ focused on God's plan and path, even he questioned some of the plans, but he kept moving in the direction God wanted him to...all the way to the cross. The path is not always an easy road, but it is the best – blessed one. Holy Communion, is just a reminder of what God has done for us, are you ready to trust that God?