

Sermon for January 25, 2015 – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5,10 (AAT)

Theme: God Wants You To Witness His Word

- 1) *Because the people of this place are important to God.*
- 2) *Because time is short and destruction is near*
- 3) *Because God forgives all who repent and believe*

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to it what I will tell you.” ³ Jonah got up and went to Nineveh as the LORD told him. Nineveh was a great city before God, a three-days’ walk. ⁴ Jonah started to go into the city a day’s walk, and preached and said: “Forty days yet, and Nineveh will be destroyed.” ⁵ Then the men of Nineveh believed God and announced a fast and dressed in sackcloth from the greatest to the least. . . . ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their wicked ways, God relented from the disaster He threatened to bring on them, and He didn’t do it.

There are around 2900 people in Kewaunee. How important are they to you? Do you tolerate them enough to bite your tongue when they annoy you? Do you care for them enough to help them out when they are in need? Are they important enough to pray for? Do you love them enough to try to save them from hell?

God loves every single soul that lives in our city. They are so precious to him that He sent Jesus to suffer and die for all of their sins. This city is so precious to God that, 150 years ago, He gathered a congregation of believers together - commissioning them with the duty of calling the citizens of our city to repentance and faith in Jesus.

You, brothers and sisters in Christ, are the heirs of those believers God gathered together 150 years ago. Throughout the decades faithful members of Immanuel have dedicated their time, talents and treasures so that this congregation might be a light in our community. Just look around you at these windows and you can see their testimony to Christ. They worked hard to bring their children up in the LORD and witness Christ’s love in their city. Proof of this fact is you, sitting here, worshipping God.

And now the baton has been passed. You are the ones holding it. God wants you to continue the work he had them start. **God wants you to witness His word** in Kewaunee. Because, as we will learn through the example of Jonah’s ministry to Nineveh: *1) the people of this place are important to God. 2) Because time is short and destruction is near. 3) Because God forgives all who repent and believe in Him for salvation.*

Part One: Because the people of this place are important to God.

Our sermon text begins: *The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to it what I will tell you.”*

Yes, this was the second time God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Do you remember what happened the first time? Jonah tried to run away from God. The LORD, however, sent a storm to stop the boat he was in, had the sailors throw him into the sea and, when he was on the brink of death – repenting of his sin – God

sent a fish to swallow him alive. After spending three days in the fish, praising God for His salvation, the LORD caused the fish to vomit him out onto dry land.

Someone might wonder: “Why, exactly, did Jonah try to run away from his duty to preach to Nineveh?” Let me explain it this way: If the LORD told you to go and preach to the terrorist group ISIS – what would your reaction be? You see, the nation Nineveh represented (the Assyrians) were even more brutal than ISIS! They were the terror of the ancient world – Israel’s enemies who, some 60 years later, would be so thorough in conquering and resettling the people in Northern Israel that 10 of its 12 tribes would be lost for the rest of human history.

Humanly speaking, it was obvious why Jonah hated Nineveh. But the LORD loved that city. Verse 3 of our text says: *Nineveh was a great city before God.* A more accurate translation would be: *Nineveh was a great city to God.* The people of this city were important to Him.

But why? These were the very people who would brutally kill and disperse Israel. Why would Nineveh be important to Him? Because when God looked at Nineveh, He saw 120,000 husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. . . who were all his children through creation, but estranged through sin and unbelief. Yes, they were wicked - angering him with their thoughts and actions. But he, nevertheless, pitied them. Why? Because he saw 120,000 souls about to die and go to hell. And so He sent His prophet – Jonah – to warn Nineveh of the very real danger that threatened them, all with the hope that they might repent and believe.

When God looks at Kewaunee, what does He see? 2900 souls; some of whom trust in him for salvation, but many others who do not. When God looks at Kewaunee He sees many of his children through creation who are estranged from him. He sees the sin that they are in and hates it. He also see the danger that threatens them and wants to save them from it, and this is why God has commissioned you (yes, you!) to witness His Word to your family, friends and neighbors. He wants you to call them to repentance and faith. Why? Because the people of this place are important to God, and because time is short and destruction is near.

Part Two: Because time is short and destruction is near

Yes, God has called you to witness His Word to your community. When did He do this? When God called you to faith! The Bible says that the LORD saved you for a purpose: *to tell of the wonderful deeds of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.* (1 Peter 2:9, AAT) Every Christian is called to represent Christ on this earth. God wants us to use the opportunities He gives us to witness the Gospel through our words and actions because the time is short.

Jonah’s message to Nineveh was: *“Forty days yet, and Nineveh will be destroyed.”* That didn’t leave the Ninevites any time to waste. If they wanted to avoid God’s judgment they needed to repent now!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: a lot of time has passed since Jesus made his ascension promise to return again soon. The devil and the world use this fact to try to convince us that there still is a lot more time left before Christ’s return. “Sure, it would be good for us to get back into Church, maybe I will do that next week or next month.” “Yes, I should really talk to my daughter about her living arrangements with her boyfriend, but I don’t want to wreck my relationship with her. Maybe I should give it some time.” “Yes, I am concerned with my neighbor’s total lack of faith, but he’s a good guy. I don’t want our relationship to be soured, so I’ll wait. We have time.”

Do we really have time?

Jesus said: *“I am coming soon!”* (Revelation 22:20, AAT). Read Matthew 24 and note all the signs that are to precede Christ’s return. Every single sign (except for the ones that will happen immediately at his coming) have been fulfilled. Every day that passes is a day bringing us closer to Judgment Day. Time is running out.

“But,” someone might say, “I don’t want to bother my friend, neighbor or family with this stuff. They grew up here. They know where my Church is. If they were interested they would ask me. What they believe is between them and God. I don’t need to get involved.”

Penn Jillette (from the comedy/magician group Penn and Teller) is an outspoken atheist. A few years back he spoke about how a Christian businessman talked with him after a show and handed him a Bible with a note inside. Penn truly respected the man for what he did. No, Penn Jillette is not a Christian. He is still an outspoken atheist, but he both respected and defended that Christian man’s attempt to proselytize him from atheism by saying: *“If you believe that there’s a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell—or not getting eternal life or whatever—and you think that, well, it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward. . . . How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?”*

So let me ask you again: how important are the people of Kewaunee to you? Do you love your family, friends and neighbors enough to want to save them from hell – even if it might mean that you will be seen as a little socially awkward? I can tell you right now – your family, friends and neighbors are very important to God. This is exactly why he chose you to live among them and gave you His Word to witness to them. Time is running out and destruction is near. Therefore, share the message God has given you, because God forgives all who look to him in repentance and faith.

Part Three: Because God forgives all who repent and believe

Jonah sinned when he tried to run away from his calling to speak God’s Word to Nineveh. We sin too, when we do not use the opportunities God gives us to witness his Gospel in Kewaunee. God humbled Jonah – leading him to recognize his sin and repent. God uses his law to humble us as well – leading us to repent of all the times we, out of fear, laziness or any other reason, don’t witness the Gospel when given the chance. And do you know what God does when we repent? The same thing He did for Jonah: he forgives us for Christ’s sake. He reassures us of his love and, yet again, commissions us to preach the Word He has given us so that His saving purpose might be accomplished.

And notice what Jonah did in the peace of his forgiveness: *Jonah got up and went to Nineveh as the LORD told him . . . and preached and said: “Forty days yet, and Nineveh will be destroyed.”*

Jonah didn’t try to sugar coat his message. He didn’t shy away from telling the truth. Jonah spoke the simple Word God told him to speak – a, humanly speaking, foolish message; but look at the effect it had!

Then the men of Nineveh believed God and announced a fast and dressed in sackcloth from the greatest to the least. . . .

The Ninevites believed the God who warned them and repented of their sins. Not only did they express genuine sorrow over their sins, they expressed this sorrow in the hope that God would be merciful and forgive them. And this repentance wasn’t a mere show either. They truly turned from their evil ways – as the last verse of our text indicates:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their wicked ways, God relented from the disaster He threatened to bring on them, and He didn't do it.

Look at the LORD's mercies and marvel: here was a nation as godless and violent as ISIS, brought to its knees through the simple witness of God's Word. The people repented, God forgave them, and thousands of souls were saved!

No, the LORD has not commissioned you to call ISIS to repentance and faith, but he has called you to witness His Word in Kewaunee. The people in this place are very special to Him. He wants them to be saved. But how should you go about this great task? What do you say?

It's really not all that complicated. Simply speak the truth in love. Don't be afraid to warn people about their sins – urging them to repent so that they can be forgiven. Moreover, don't be afraid to tell people what God has done to save them. Tell them about Jesus, his love and his work on the cross to forgive us. God will work through this simple message to bring people to repentance and faith. No, not every one will repent and believe. Many people will reject the Gospel we share, but there will be others who are moved by the simple message we speak. They will repent and turn from sin. God will forgive them and they will be saved.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: for 150 years the members of this congregation have shared the Gospel in our community. May God grant that we all understand the importance of this mission and continue to witness God's Word in Kewaunee. Why? *Because the people of this place are important to God. Because the time is short and destruction is near, and because God forgives all who repent and trust in Him for salvation.* Amen.