

Sermon Theme: The Word Still Works

**Sermon Reading: Jonah 3:1-10**

The commercial starts off with a man bending over to pull weeds from the garden when all of a sudden he grabs his back in sheer pain while shaking his head wondering what he is going to do. The scene moves to a lady reaching for the tools hanging on the wall and “bam” grabs her shoulder, “Ah, the pain and agony, why won’t this pain go away,” is written on all over her face. The narrator tells you, “We’ve all been there before: pain that won’t go away and keeps you from doing the things you need and want to do. You’ve tried all the other medicine, and it just doesn’t work. That’s why you need \_\_\_\_\_.” At that point it switches over to supposedly real individuals who aren’t paid actors who assure you they’ve used this product and it works!

And that’s what we are looking for, right? Before buying a new tool or gadget, trying out new medicine, before using something, we wonder “Does it work?” And so we look for those results that the new tool does actually make your life easier, that medicine does what it claims it will do. We don’t care what the advertisement says or what the commercial claims should happen, we want to see the results. Does it work? When we don’t see the results, it’s hard for us to believe that it works or is working. This can be difficult living in a world today that pushes instant gratification; we aren’t very good at waiting for those results and so we are quick to question if it works. Waiting for your food at a restaurant, one might joke wondering if they had to butcher the cow first for your burger because it is taking so long. In the back of our minds even when we know better we are wondering, “What are they doing back there? Are they actually working? Because I don’t see any results.” We struggle with this when it comes to God’s Word too because more often than not we do not see the results—or at least the results we want or hope for. We usually do not see the type of results that Jonah did with the city of Nineveh. Look again at what happened in Jonah 3:1-10.

Usually when we think of Jonah we think of him and the Big Fish. Remember how once before God had called Jonah and told him to go to this great city of Nineveh. But Jonah tried to run away from the Lord, getting on a boat, and sailing for a distant country. But God wasn’t done with him. God sent a great wind and a violent storm that the ship was threatened to be broken up at sea. You might recall how after realizing what it all meant, Jonah convinced the sailors to throw him overboard. Then the Lord not only saved the sailors by calming the sea but he saved Jonah by providing that great fish to swallow Jonah where he remained for three days. It’s a favorite story to learn and to tell because it is so incredible.

But I’d be willing to argue it is not as incredible as what happened in Jonah 3. The Lord gives Jonah a second chance. Think of how hard that is for us to give someone another chance, to trust them with a task when someone has failed us. But, the Lord comes to

Jonah a second time after saving him and gives him a job to do; the same one he tried to run away from the first time. The mission is quite simple: go to the great city of Nineveh—a city in a foreign land with people who did not like the Jews—and proclaim the message God gives. And this time Jonah obeys. How nerve-racking that trip must have been as he nears the city and sees how large it is—three days it took to go through or around it. It was huge; some estimate there were around 800,000 people living in it! Jonah’s message is quite simple: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Stop and think about how incredible this is. Remember again, not too long ago Jonah was running in the opposite direction. And now he is in this massive city with a message that not only would have been highly unbelievable but also highly offensive. Who does this foreigner think he is to come into this city and start saying this other God is going to destroy it? That God has no power here, does he? Who does he think he is to tell them what they are doing is wrong? What a change in Jonah—the fearful became the fearless, the meek and hiding became the bold and open, the doubt-filled is now trusting as he shares this message.

And look at the results. The people listened. And not only did they pay attention, they believed God. A fast was proclaimed, sackcloth—a loose garment like a sack that wasn’t very comfortable and used to symbolize great mourning—was worn from the important people to the so-called nobodies. This was a city-wide reaction to God’s message proclaimed by Jonah. Even the king of the city heard the warning, put on sackcloth, and sat down in the dirt. It was decreed that human beings and animals alike are to not taste anything—eat or drink nothing—and wear sackcloth. They were told to call on God. Each individual person is to turn from their personal evil ways and violence. And we know they did because we see what God does in v.10: he turns from his anger. An entire city of 800,000 people turns from their wicked ways.

It’s amazing to hear those types of results from God’s message being shared. But we often don’t have that. In fact, most of the time, we see or at least seem to see the opposite where someone rejects God’s Word and his message. How discouraging that is. What are we doing wrong? Notice Jonah isn’t doing anything special here—he is simply sharing the message that God had given to him. That’s what we have too: God’s message given to us in the Bible with the mission to share it. We aren’t told we have to leave our homes and go into foreign cities; there’s plenty of work for you and me to do right here in our backyard.

But we’ve done that before. You’ve shared God’s Word with someone else. But nothing happened—from what you can tell. They went back to whatever they were doing. They didn’t stop living in that sin. They didn’t start living a more God-pleasing life. There just seemed to be nothing; no results. What went wrong? What are we supposed to do?

We see this with our church when we reach out to those who have wandered or who are straying. It's no big secret that our pews are emptier than they used to be. What went wrong? What are we supposed to do? You might then look at your own life. You know God's Word. You know his warnings. And you know how you still wrestle with sin, have tried to turn from it, and found yourself back in that same sin again. What am I supposed to do?

So we find ourselves wrestling with believing the power of God's Word. We are tempted to think that the type of preaching by Jonah worked back then in those times, but there must be something else that we need to make God's Word work today. Maybe you think I am not the right person for this work; it's someone else's responsibility who has better experience and knowledge in this area. There's the temptation to change the message or at least shade the offensive parts so that it is more appealing to others. We wrestle with these temptations because from a human being's perspective God's Word just doesn't seem to make sense to use. It just doesn't seem effective enough, or work at all especially when we don't see the results we expect on the timetable that we want. And so we doubt the power of God's Word. And when we doubt the power of God's Word, we are less willing to share it, less willing to grow in it, less willing to believe it.

How foolish we are to think that we can do something to make God's Word more effective. How quick we are to forget God's promises and instead rely on our own flawed human experiences. How easy it is for us to push to the side that God has told us that his ways and his thoughts are greater than our ways or thoughts. **“For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength”** (1 Corinthians 1:25). How foolish we are to forget that when we question the power of God's Word, we question God. God forgive me for not trusting your promise, for doubting you.

Look again at what God did for Jonah. He did not cut himself off from Jonah when he tried to run away, but instead went after Jonah again. The Lord—the gracious, compassionate God, slow-to-anger rich in love—did not strike Jonah down with a bolt of lightning in that storm or leave him to drown in that raging sea. No, the Lord sent a great fish to save him and gives Jonah another chance to serve him.

See what God did for Jonah and see what God has done for you personally. You who were steeped in sin, corrupted to the core, with wickedness and evil ways greatly angered God. He is a just God who demands perfection so we were no better than those Ninevites when God threatened to destroy their city in 40 days. But, like with the city of Nineveh and with Jonah, in his compassionate undeserving mercy, God does not look on what you did, but on what Jesus did for you with his perfect life and innocent death and now gives you personally. Out of love for you God does not leave you to be lost and

condemned in your sin but like with Nineveh God sends his message and gives his Law to convict you, stop you from continuing down a path of destruction, and show you your need to be saved. The Lord does not leave you to question, “**Who knows? Maybe God will relent and turn his anger so that we will not perish,**” as the king of Nineveh asked. But instead, he guarantees he will not treat you as your sins deserve because he makes you his child in the waters of baptism, forgiving your sins, and calling you his own. The Lord gives the assurance of his loving kindness through the Word that is preached and read. He shows you the truth that your wickedness has been forgiven and your sin is not held against you inviting you to come to the Lord’s Supper to receive Jesus’ body and blood as a pledge of that forgiveness that is yours personally. As God did with Jonah, as God treated Nineveh, so he has done with you—you were a sinner reborn to have another chance to serve and love God.

How do you know this? How do you believe it? The same way that Jonah did and Nineveh did: God works through his Word. You did not see the Word plant the faith and did not see it work in your heart of sin. But you believe it to be true because the seed was planted and you know. Just as a farmer knows when the seed is planted the seed will grow, so the seed of God’s Word, when it is planted, it too will work. As we continue in this life, we continue to work to turn away from our wicked ways and those sins we wrestle with. We will be doing this until the day that we are welcomed into heaven. And so we thank God with words and actions for his loving kindness and his patience that he renews us every morning with his grace and ask him to continue to work in our hearts to better serve him and his will. As we grow to see how God’s Word has changed us, like Jonah, God gives us the opportunity to serve him in serving others using whatever gifts God has given to us—whether that’s your time, your talents, or the money in your pocket. They are all gifts of God that we now get to use to his glory. Like Jonah we too are sent and want to share this Good News so that sinners turn from their sins and, in faith, turn to God. The tool stays the same and as it worked for Jonah, the Word still works. Amen.