

***Sunday School Lesson***  
***“Stories of Faith” Series***  
***Lesson 4: Jonah***

Opening Thoughts:

In the great tradition of the Patriarchs and Prophets, Jonah too is reluctant to follow God into prophetic ministry. As God calls, Jonah literally tries to run in the other direction. The power of God, however, eventually compels Jonah to the city of Nineveh. While the city repents, Jonah grows jealous. While we often focus on Jonah in the Whale and Nineveh’s repentance, the story outlines the difficult task of faith when God has called us to the seeming impossible.

1. Quick: What’s the first thing you think of when you hear “Jonah”?
2. When has God called you to do something difficult? How did you initially respond?
3. Have you ever been jealous of someone who changed their life? Why?

***Please open with a time of prayer.***

Background:

The Book of Jonah is part of the greater *Book of the Twelve* in the Hebrew Bible which contains much of what we would call, “minor prophets”. Others included in this section are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, (the aforementioned) Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi. Scholars are split on the dates of Jonah. Some place the book during the Babylonian exile, around 550 BCE. While others place it later, between 500-450 BCE. Unlike other prophets, Jonah is not written in a first-person style. Rather, the story is told from an outside perspective. This adds another layer of complexity as the story seems to convey an almost proverbial quality about faith and jealousy.

Chapters 1 and 2 of Jonah consist of the call from God and of Jonah’s “reluctant” journey to Nineveh. When God first calls Jonah, the response is a resounding no. When God pushes, Jonah literally goes in the opposite direction. After a storm, a night in a sea animal’s gut, and reluctantly arriving on the shores of Nineveh, Jonah finally begins his prophetic ministry.

Here in chapter 3 Jonah’s prophetic ministry reaches a fever pitch as he begins his journey across the city, warning the people of God’s impending judgment. Surprisingly, the people not only respond to Jonah’s message, but the king himself declares a time of repentance and fasting. This response from Nineveh causes God to change course, not destroying the people or the city. At this point, most of us stop reading. Chapter 4, however, brings us back to reality as Jonah rests after his journey and ministry. Upon seeing, however, that God is not going to bring judgment upon the city, he becomes angry and begins to question God. Jonah’s response seems strange but is often one we as well experience. Jesus even mentions the story of Jonah in the gospels when challenged about who will inherit the kingdom.

1. What is remarkable about Jonah’s prophetic ministry?
2. When have you found yourself jealous or envious? How did you respond?
3. Do you see yourself in Jonah’s story? Why or why not?

Main Passage:        **Jonah 3**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.’ 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.

1. What is the main point of this passage? What stands out?
2. How is Jonah’s faith on display? What about the people? The King?
3. In your estimation what is the most profound aspect of this passage?

Reflection:

The story of Jonah is an important lesson to anyone about the power of faith and repentance. One the one hand, we have Jonah. He clearly has great ability for the work of God, but refuses at nearly every turn to follow. It is only when God forces his hand that he, reluctantly, agrees to follow God’s lead. Upon beginning his ministry, the city of Nineveh almost immediately begins to repent.

On the other side, we find the city and king. One would naturally expect them to be resistant at best, and hostile at worse, to Jonah’s message. However, they quickly begin to repent and embrace the forgiveness that God is offering. God withdraws the threat of judgment from the city and they live “happily ever after”, so to speak.

This is where we collide with the story. While the people and the city are saved, Jonah becomes resentful. He was faithful, he has followed God, and now those who only now repented are saved. Jonah states, “it’s not fair”. We too find ourselves saying “it’s not fair”. But faith does not demand that things be “fair”, but that we trust in God and proclaim the kingdom. Jonah should be rejoicing at the great conversion that has taken place, just as we should when even one new person comes to faith in our midst.

1. When have you felt like Jonah? What occurred?
2. Why is God’s grace so transformative? How do we see it in this passage?
3. How will you be more welcoming to those experiencing God’s grace for the first time?