

WGUMC January 25, 2015 "Nineveh Repents"
Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-15

The setting for our story this morning is the great Mesopotamian city of Nineveh, nestled along the Tigris River in what is now Northern Iraq. Today the city has another name: Mosul. Back then, Nineveh was a center of power in the Assyrian empire. In the 7th century B.C.E, it was the largest city in the ancient world.

We do not know when the Prophet Jonah issued his warning to the people of Nineveh, but even if God did decide to spare the city, the rebels did not. In 612 B.C.E., the city was attacked by an alliance of peoples—including the Babylonians and the Persians—all of whom had been under the thumb of the Assyrians. When the battle was over, Nineveh was left in ruins, but that was not the end of God's remarkable work in the land of Jonah.

Here's your history lesson. While we may be familiar with the part of our history that tells of the expansion of

Christianity into the West, into Europe and then North and South America, most of us know almost nothing about the expansion of the church into the East, into Asia. I don't know much but I can tell you that the developments were very different in different directions.

One could certainly argue that the East kept culturally closer to Jesus and the Apostles than did the West. For one thing, the Eastern Churches were never allied to a military power as was the Church in Rome. So they remained for the most part a minority sect, undergoing occasional persecutions just like the first Christians. And the Assyrian Church in the East kept using Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, the language of Jesus, while the Western Church adopted Latin, the language of Caesar.

But if you think that that made the Western Church more sophisticated, think again. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Western Church entered the Dark Ages. But the Eastern

Churches never did lose touch with the classical world. As a result, by the year 800, the Eastern Churches had achieved a level of culture and learning not seen in the Western Church for another 500 years.

At the time, Bishop Timothy I was patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East. He lived in Iraq, under a Muslim caliph, with whom he had good relations. But he had no imperial authority to dictate church law and no invading army to spread his religion. Yet Christians in what are now the countries of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, India and China all looked to Timothy as their spiritual leader. At that moment in history, Asia rather than Europe seemed to hold the brightest future for Christianity. [see Philip Jenkins' book, *The Lost History of Christianity*.]

It's important to understand this history so we can understand what is going on in this moment. There have been followers of Jesus in Iraq for almost 2,000 years and in this

21st century, we are witnessing what may well be the end of Christianity in that part of Asia. And we can blame the war we started. As awful as he was, Saddam Hussein protected the Christian minority in Iraq. When he was taken down, so were they. Extremists of all sects started bombing churches, killing priests, and kidnapping Christians for ransom. Over the next ten years, over half of the Christians have fled the country.

Then in July of last year, the most extreme of the extremists, ISIS, took over Mosul. They issued a threat to the Christians who remained there: either convert to Islam, pay a tax, leave the country or be killed. That threat was later revised: leave or die. The militants burned some more churches and then blew up the mosque that had been built over the traditional site of the tomb of Jonah. No one—neither Christian nor Muslim—is safe in Mosul today.

The violence there is unthinkable and the results may be irreversible. It's tragic to think that a Christian witness that has

lasted in Iraq for two millennia could be snuffed out in two decades. And so we cry out, "God, where is the Jonah who will go to Nineveh, go to Mosul, and preach repentance?"

Here is another example of an Old Testament story gaining new relevance. We catch up to it in Chapter Three. Jonah, having escaped from the big fish, finally decides to stop running from God long enough to go down to Nineveh. He stands on the street corners to tell the citizens there that God is unhappy. In forty days, this city will be destroyed. Then, much to his surprise and consternation, the people believe God and repent. They do so, hoping that a God who is powerful enough to destroy such a great city will be merciful enough to save it.

But what does it mean to repent? Literally, it means to *turn around, turn back*. But to turn around, first you have to stop going in the direction you were going. So when the King of Nineveh hears the news, he has to stop being the king. He

has to remove his robe, the symbol of his kingship, and put on sackcloth. He has to change his uniform so that everyone will know he is changing his ways. All normal patterns of life, even the most basic routines of eating and drinking, must stop, because only when we come to a full stop do we have the spiritual capacity to think and rethink what we are doing and where we are going.

Sometimes the stop is forced upon us. Have you ever been in an accident or got sick and landed in the ER? All of a sudden everything comes to a stop. Your calendar is clear. You're lying in a hospital bed and maybe all you can do is think and rethink. It's a good time to repent, to plan how you are going to stop doing the things you know are hurting you and turn back to the God who is trying to help you.

At other times, the stop is chosen by us. The Walk to Emmaus is, for those who choose to go on it, a full stop in our overbooked, overpriced, nonstop life. And there's a reason that

it takes place over three days: you have stop the craziness long enough to be able to examine it, long enough to imagine what life could be like without it.

Unfortunately, we Methodists don't follow our founder when it comes to fasting. Maybe that's because, since our circuit rider days, we Methodists have always been on the move. It almost goes against our nature to stop. But if we don't stop, how do we turn around? How do we turn back to God if we never stop long enough to notice that we have turned away from God?

The Assyrian Church of the East has a strong tradition of fasting, and you may not be aware of this, but they have a church here in San Jose. Yes, there are Assyrian Christians in the South Bay, and their church is right down the street from us on Minnesota Avenue. So I contacted their priest by email on Friday.

I asked Father Lawrance about how Assyrian Christians interpret the story of Jonah and what it means for them today. He sent me a long email back and told me that three weeks before the beginning of Lent, the Assyrian Church commemorates the repentance of the Ninevites with a three-day fast. [It's called *Baouta d' Ninwayeh* or the Rogation (beseeching) of the Ninevites.] This tradition dates back to the 6th century, when there was a plague in the city of Kirkuk in Northern Iraq. The Christians there fasted and prayed, just as the Ninevites had done, and the plague miraculously ended. Ever since then, the Churches of the East have strictly observed this fast. It begins tomorrow.

I told Father Lawrance that we would pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ, those who have been forced to leave and those who are struggling to stay in Iraq. I normally fast on Wednesdays and this week, I will keep a candle lit for them.

The King of Nineveh called a fast. The most powerful man in the most populous city in the ancient world turned back to God and it made a difference. It wasn't just that he didn't wear his robe or eat his dinner that day. He commanded the people, "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." Repentance is not just about making a show of your piety. It's about making a full stop in order to do deep reflection and make drastic changes. It isn't true repentance unless we actually stop hurting ourselves and others.

So as we get closer to our observations of Lent this year, let's look at our own lives. What's going on there that is working its evil in us? How can we stop doing violence to ourselves and to others? Are we eating too much, drinking too much, or moving too little? Are we denying a problem, avoiding a conflict, nursing a grudge, or refusing to forgive? Whatever it is, when are we going to stop?

I went on retreat at Mount Hermon this past week, not really by choice. The Bishop "invited" all the clergy. The theme of the retreat was emotional resiliency. We also had a session on grieving. It was timely. To be honest, I've been feeling numb these past few weeks.

The retreat was just long enough to realize that I needed to put a stop to something. I wish I could put a stop to the dying. But at least I can put a stop to all the late nights of working. Because I can't be the pastor you need me to be when I'm running on empty. I don't only hurt myself, but I hurt you, because I can't give you my best.

So, I hereby declare a fast from staying up past midnight to answer email, write a prayer, or finish a sermon. From now on, I will regard sleep as my sacred duty to God and to you. And the reason I am telling you this is on the off chance that I might inspire you to stop, take the time to think and rethink

your life, and—before you do any more damage to yourself—
turn back to the One who loves you and wants the best for you.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled,
and the kingdom of God has come near." Do you want to live
there? Then "repent and believe in the good news."

I don't know if by repenting we can stop a plague or save
a city. But if you pray, "Let there be peace on earth" also pray,
"let it begin with me."