

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

God's Big House

Jonah 3

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The only reference to the prophet Jonah outside the book which bears his name is in 2 Kings 14. There, in one verse, under Jonah's leadership, Israel's borders expanded from Lebohamath in the north as far as the Sea of Arabah in the south. Under Jonah, the kingdom of Israel was established from north to south. This is a great accomplishment for Jonah. In spite of the bad king, Jeroboam, who ruled at the time, Jonah is a national hero. Jonah's an interesting guy. He is one whom God could use in spite of everything to bless and protect God's people. Then, we see in the book of Jonah, what God can do even in spite of Jonah himself.

Sometimes God works through us. The good news of Jonah is that sometimes God works in spite of us. The good news of Jonah is that God goes as far as needed and does whatever is needed to reclaim and redeem what is His, which is everything and everyone.

Jonah, the extender of boundaries and protector of borders, is called by God to go outside the boundaries and borders to the foreign city of Nineveh to warn them of God's impending judgment. In doing so, Jonah was about to discover just how big God's house in all the world could be. He's about to discover just how wide God's mercy can be. Even all the way to Nineveh. However big you think God is, God is bigger. However expansive you think the House of God house is, God's house is even bigger and its front porch has room for everyone who will come. Jonah's not so sure he likes any of that.

In the story, he's sent east to Nineveh, the ancient capital of the empire of Assyria--a violent, ruthless people whose violence was visited upon Israel in terrible ways. Jonah was sent from his comfortable home to the belly of the beast to stand there in front of all those people and proclaim God's judgment and to watch unfold God's mercy on those very people.

If God's judgment can reach Nineveh and punish them, God is pretty powerful. If God's mercy can reach Nineveh and redeem them, God is awfully gracious. That's what worried Jonah. He worried for his own safety in going there, but what he really worried about was that after all his proclaiming about God's judgment, God would do nothing to punish them and everything to redeem them. Those people. If God would do that, there's a wideness to God's mercy that's hard to comprehend. The front porch of the house of mercy would be wide and deep indeed. It's a big house.

The church I grew up in was kind of serious. We took ourselves kind of seriously. Where other youth groups, apparently, were using fog machines and whipped cream fights in their church gyms as they swung from the rafters, we were going to choir rehearsal and on annual choir tours singing four-part choral anthems, leading VBSs in inner cities, and hanging sheetrock on mission church renovation projects.

So it wasn't until college when I got involved in a Christian group there, that my eyes were opened—wide open to all these things all these other kids had been doing. And the songs they'd been singing. They knew all the words to songs I'd never heard of. This is the early 90's—songs like *Awesome God*—they knew all the words to that song--and *Lord, I Lift Your Name on High* and they'd go around singing, *Got 2 B Tru*. One of their favorites was one to which they knew all the hand motions. We learned to sing with our hands stiffly by our side, even if you had an itch on your nose, you were not to move your hands. That's not how they were taught. So I was standing there dumbfounded as the band belted out the song *Big House* by Audio Adrenaline, and everyone around me started doing all the things with their hands. My church growing up definitely didn't have audio adrenaline. We had an organ. My choir didn't sing *Big House*, but we did sing *In This Very Room*, there's quite enough love for all the world, which is pretty much the same message in a different genre.

I was remembering *Big House* recently. I hadn't heard it in years, but I found it easily on the web to play. Is it a good song? Oh yes, it is an awesome song. "Come and go with me to my Father's House." You can't not groove to this song. And if you know the hand motions, which I picked up along the way back then, you can't not do them. You can't not draw a house with your hands when it sings, "It's a big, big house with lots and lots of room." You can't not make like you're eating when it sings, "There's a big, big table with lots and lots of food." And you know what to do at the line, "There's a big, big yard where we can play football."

It's an intentionally silly, fun song about God's expansive embrace, no matter where you come from or what you're experiencing now or what life was like when you were growing up. I mean, it's a silly song, but there's some depth here. God has a big house where there's room. Come and go with me to my father's house. Silly song. Good message. Judging by the comments on the video, stretching back years, this song brings back a lot of happy nostalgia for folks who sang it as children in Sunday school or as youth at camp.

God has a big house and will do anything and go anywhere to reclaim and redeem all that is his—everything and everyone who needs to be brought back home. Sometimes we need to hear that kind of message more than once. Jonah did. Sometimes we're slow learners. Jonah was.

Here's someone who is told: go east to Nineveh, the belly of the beast, and tell those people about God. Tell them God has a big, big house, and there's lots of room for them if they come. Give them a chance. At this, Jonah heads west as far as he can go until he ends up, in the belly of a different kind of beast.

We meet him here in chapter 3 with a 2nd chance. Go to Nineveh. He did. The people of Nineveh, quite unexpectedly, didn't need to be told twice. To Jonah's message, they responded dramatically and immediately. They repented. They turned to God, and the judgment of God upon them was turned to mercy.

We didn't hear the rest of the story this morning, but you may already know how Jonah responded to this. He wasn't happy at all about it. "I knew you would forgive them. That's just what kind of God you are, you God of mercy, you." But even Nineveh needs a chance to change.

"Shouldn't I care about them?" God responds in the last verse of the story. "Shouldn't I care about them? They are mine. They may not be yours, but they are mine. They are all mine, the adults, the children, the animals, all of them." The story ends that way with that challenge to Jonah hanging in the air unanswered. It hangs there like it's a question for everyone who reads the story for all time.

The story is sometimes dissected by people who really want to know what kind of fish Jonah was swallowed by or whether that's just a parable; they want to examine the character of Nineveh to understand how bad it really was—it was. Or they want to put Jonah on the sofa to assess his psyche. All of these are interesting facets of the story: the character of the fish, the character of Nineveh, the character of Jonah. But from beginning to end, this story isn't about any of that. It's about the character of God.

This is about the character of God through the lenses of a reluctant prophet swallowed by and spit out from the belly of a sea monster and to a people who repented and asked for God's mercy and received it. If God wants something, God's going to get it. If God wants you, God's going to get you, to change you, and use you. You can run, but wherever you run, you'll be running right into God's waiting arms. You can't outrun yourself---wherever you go, there you are. And there God is.

Life is like this, we can't outrun ourselves, and we can't outrun God's hand upon us. This is true for us whether we identify with Jonah the reluctant prophet, or even with Nineveh, called to stop destroying the earth and its people, called to live at peace with God, their Creator.

Seeing ourselves as a Jonah character is a fairly common and meaningful way of meditating on the scriptures. Seeing ourselves as Nineveh is maybe a little more challenging. It isn't a perfect comparison, but there are some ways the sackcloth fits. In his encyclical called *Laudao Si*, Pope Francis doesn't quote the lyrics to *Big House*, but he does describe the whole world as a common home we share with one another as God's children. The whole world as God's House that we live in together and have responsibility for. He appeals for all Christians and all people to care for creation and for one another as in God's common home. He channels some Jonah in Nineveh's energy as he writes, "The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, in all forms of life. This is why the earth... 'groans in travail'" (*Rom 8:22*)."

In other words, we are Nineveh, stomping through the world as if we are its lords and masters, not as children living under the shelter of divine mercy. Sometimes We forget our common home is God's house.

When we act as lords and masters, and forget who we were created to be, I can't help but feel like we can see ourselves as Nineveh, being warned by God's prophet of judgment on our actions and impending doom if we do not change. When we're challenged and invited to change our ways and come home, this is a gift.

Just as the young men in the Gospel were called from their fishing boats to be Jesus' disciples, so we, too, are called by God to live in the gratuitous love of God in fraternity with one another and with all creation. God's house is a big house with big love in which there's room for all of us if we will live with this love, but it's a tiny house for a tiny God where there's no room for anyone if we cannot.

The scale and seriousness of Nineveh's repentance is no small-hearted vision. At the word of judgment, they are undone. From the king to the least, they repent of their sin and turn to God. Even the animals were dressed in sackcloth and ashes. And God shows mercy.

It's totally remarkable that the story of Jonah was left in Israel's Bible. Nineveh did awful things to Israel. Other prophets like Nahum and Micah, for example, describe the terrible pain the people experienced at the hands of Nineveh and the retribution they prayed God would unleash on Nineveh. But here's this story, still here, this beautiful, powerful, challenging, harrowing story, still here. This hopeful story about an enemy, the worst sort, self-made lords and masters of the universe, over whom divine justice is powerful, and to whom divine mercy is shown. It's almost too much to bear for someone like Jonah who would rather just give up on them.

But God won't give up on them. And that's the character of God. God will do whatever is necessary and go wherever he must to reclaim and redeem all that is His and gather his people together under one roof.

This is the story Jesus invoked when he was pressed by religious leaders to give proof he is the messiah. "The sign you'll be given," he said, "is the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," revealing that God will do whatever necessary, even death, and go wherever he must, even the cross, to reclaim and redeem all creation that is His and gather his people home where there's room, even for Nineveh and room enough for you, too.

Amen.