

Turning and turning

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[0 : 00] Father, thank you that you are a speaking God. You speak to us words, words of love, words of mercy, words that are from you. Pray that we would hear that. Pray that Marco reads your words.

We would listen. And after that, as I try to explain the passage, I pray that you would work through that. We would hear you speak, not me, in each of our hearts.

You know where each one of us is at. Would we hear what you want to say to us today? In Jesus' name. Amen. Good morning, church.

Today's reading is from Jonah, chapter 3, verses 1 to 10. If you are using the Bible, it's at page 727, 727. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breath. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.

[1 : 21] And he called out, yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh. By the decree of the king and his nobles, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything.

Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

Who knows? God may turn and relent, and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish. When God saw what they did, how they had turned from the evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them.

[2 : 28] And he did not do it. This is the word of God. Great. Thank you, Margo.

So, yes, if you're visiting, we're doing a series on this short book of Jonah. It's a great book. And it's nice to have the youth here today.

And I know you've been doing Jonah as well, so it's nice that you're not here in this random sermon. But actually, hey, this is the next chapter of what you've been looking at. Now, yeah, what do we see today?

I don't know if you know the word revival. It's one of those Christian words. Sometimes it refers to kind of meetings where, you know, someone preaches the gospel. But usually it's kind of when God really powerfully works suddenly, right?

And a lot of people are renewed in their faith. And a lot of people are being saved, are coming to Christ. It's a wonderful thing, of course. I mean, what we want at Wanamark is for many people to come to Jesus and receive the best gift ever.

[3 : 31] That's our greatest desire. And it's wonderful to see that happening a lot, right? In the past, last week we talked about John Newton. That was part of a great awakening in England.

And many people, yeah, were saved. There's been a Welsh revival, early last century Korean revival. Apparently these days there's in the U.S. and U.K.

a quiet revival of a lot of Gen Z men coming to church. I don't know if that's true. I live here. But it sounds really exciting. Right? But sometimes it's also very unexpected.

You have people being saved who you wouldn't expect. A few years ago there was a movie. I think it was a secular movie, Jesus Revolution. It was really cool.

It was about a kind of revival in kind of California in the 60s with lots of hippies becoming Christians. And that was very disruptive for the church, right? Because everyone always looked their Sunday best.

[4 : 29] And then you have these people with long hair and shorts and sandals coming in. And, you know, okay, this is really not what we expect. Do these people, what do they need?

Right? I mean, that's always been an issue. In the book of Acts, that's where we're going after Jonah. You know, we see the gospel going to Gentiles, the non-Jews. Big question.

Do they need to get circumcised? What do you actually need to, you know, to come to God? And, yeah, those hippies. Do they need the haircuts? What do they need to get to God? Right?

Now, it's great to think about that. And we want people to come to God, I hope. What do people need? And that is what we see today. We see a lot of people turning to God and maybe surprising people, unexpected people.

Is that possible? And then what do they need to do? Well, what do you need to turn back to God? That's where we're going. Now, Jonah, if you don't know the story, of course, he's a prophet. But he is one of God's spokesmen, one of his ambassadors.

[5 : 32] And he, yeah, you probably know he gets this message to go to Nineveh. Nineveh is the capital of the local superpower of the day. Yeah. And violent, cruel people.

Of course, he doesn't want to go there. He runs the other way, ends up in a storm, nearly drowns, except that God saves him. He sends a big fish to swallow him up. And while Jonah has a change of heart, he's really grateful.

So the fish brings him to land. And that's where we pick up the story. What I'll do, I'll just first go through the story because it's quite short and quite simple. And then, yeah, what are the things that God wants us to learn?

So, yeah, what happens? Well, God's first, well, as we, maybe, I don't know if you expected this, but God still has this job to do, right? So God calls Jonah again, verse one.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

[6 : 32] I'm not sure if he was still on the beach with seaweed in his hair just from the fish or whether he, you know, he went home first. No idea. But he gets exactly the same call, right?

Arise and go to Nineveh. But big change from before, right? He obeys. Verse two, so Jonah, verse three, so Jonah arose and went to Nineveh.

He arose and went just like he should. I don't know what he really thought of it. We find out next week. I'm not sure if he really wanted to go, but he does go, right?

Last week, he had such an amazing change of heart. God rescued him. He was grateful. And so, yeah, this time he did go. He was amazed by the Lord's salvation.

So he goes to Nineveh. I don't know what you would expect then to happen. I mean, Nineveh is a huge city, right? It says here, Nineveh was an exceedingly great city.

[7 : 26] Three days, journey, and breath. I mean, this is nearly 2,800 years, about 2,800 years ago, right? Most people lived in villages. This town has 120,000 people, we read next week.

That's huge, right? So it takes three days to go around it. But Jonah doesn't need three days, right? On his very first day, what happens? Verse 4, Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.

And he called out, he had 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Right? Judgment is coming. And he immediately goes viral, right?

Verse 5, and the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. There's a huge response.

The people believe him. The people turn and mourn. And, you know, it even reaches the king. Verse 6, the word reached the king of Nineveh. Like the emperor of this huge empire.

[8 : 27] And he arose, but he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he makes this proclamation for the whole nation, for the whole city.

Everyone should fast. Even the flocks and herds, they get no water, no food. No. Everyone call out to God, right? Verse 8, let man and beast be covered with sackcloth.

Let him call out mightily to God. Yeah, the call out to be spared. And not just mourn. They didn't just make a show of it, right? They repented.

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. And maybe different cities are known for their own vices. The Ninevites, they were violent.

And, yeah, we need to stop our violence. Why? Well, verse 9, who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

[9 : 26] We don't want to perish, right? I mean, judgment is coming, but maybe God will spare us. I mean, judgment is right. They knew that. We just say it in the catechism. It is right that we who were created by God should live for his glory.

And, of course, violence is not to God's glory. They know judgment is coming. But let's stop it. Let's plead for mercy. And that's what they did.

And guess what? Well, it worked. Verse 10. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them.

And he did not do it. And he sees how they turned from evil. He hears their cries. And he responds with mercy. He relents. He doesn't destroy the city.

And phew. Which is so ironic, right? He's one of the worst prophets in the Bible. The only one who kind of, you know, ran away from God and those kind of things. And he's grumpy. But, you know, he has this incredible ministry.

[10 : 27] I'd love to see that, right? I preach another bad sermon and everyone falls on their knees. And wow. That'd be great. I mean, when you read this, it sounds so unrealistic, right?

All the cattle and the herds and everyone. You know, many people think, Jonah, I just made up, right? This fish. And then the Assyrians all repenting. Oh, come on.

Actually, I once heard a lecture. Did you know that Assyrian history is really interesting? They kept a lot of records, right? They kept a lot of details about all their wars and all their conquests.

And the kings always made these wonderful pictures of, you know, how they conquered countries and those kind of things. For some reason, in the 770s BC, Assyria went dark.

For some reason, you know, no records of any conquest, no wars. For about 35 years. During three kings, three brothers who were, who would have been alive at the same time.

[11:33] Very weird, right? Even in the Bible, we see Assyria attacking them and then suddenly for a few decades, they have peace. Now, of course, it's an argument from silence.

But it's interesting, right, that suddenly for a few years, for a few decades, there's no, the Assyrian stop. What makes such a powerful empire suddenly stop, yeah, stop conquering, stop fighting?

It's an argument from silence. But it's really interesting that this seems to be, yeah, the Bible gives us real history. This seems to really have happened. But, of course, it's a good, it's not here just to show it, hey, this is real.

It's a great story. Now, what should we learn from this? So, that's a great story. It's wonderful. Why is it in the Bible? What are we supposed to pick up from what happened here?

I think the first thing, well, we just sang about his mercy is more. I hope you see God's incredible mercy, right? If you ask me what Jonah is about, I would say it's about God's mercy.

[12:39] I mean, there's a lot you see about God, right? We see his sovereignty, right? How he can control storms and fishes and next week, worms and winds. And, you know, he controls everything.

But there's no development. Actually, what do we really see develop here? What do we have a greater vision of by the end of the book is God's mercy.

I mean, and not just in this chapter. I mean, even last week. I mean, come on, Jonah. Would you have saved Jonah, right? He's a prophet. He is one of God's spokesmen. He's held to a really high standard.

God gives him a job and he runs away. I mean, God had hundreds of prophets. He could easily have let Jonah drown and chosen another one, right? Except God sent a fish and saved Jonah.

I mean, that fish was already in place, right? You know, God had already prepared the fish to save him. He was going to save Jonah, right? God is really merciful. And no wonder Jonah is thanking and praising God.

[13:40] And then here, the Ninevites, right? Again, as we heard two weeks ago, these were terrible people. They were violent and cruel. They were the worst bullies of the ancient Near East.

They weren't ashamed of it, right? That picture I showed you with the kind of... Actually, I first had another one of some nice people being tortured and everything. I decided, okay, if I put that up, it's too distracting.

But the king would decorate his palace with all these wonderful images of people being tortured and everything. I don't know if you remember when Islamic State was around, like 10, 15 years ago.

I mean, that was so shocking because they just celebrated their violence, right? I mean, there's many nations in the world doing evil things. But then when the UN speaks to them, they always say, oh, no, no, we're not doing anything, right?

Because they kind of know it's wrong. Except with Islamic State, they would behead people and video it and put it on the internet. And that was so shocking, right? These people, they have just no shame.

[14:44] They celebrate their violence. Well, maybe the Ninevites were a bit like that, right? They celebrated their violence. And yet, God had mercy.

God sent them a prophet to warn them. And when they turned from their evil, he forgave them, despite everything they had done. Right?

That should be amazing, right? I mean, God is merciful. We know that. We believe that. But how merciful is he really? Is he this merciful, this merciful, right? I hope we see here he is, he even spares Nineveh.

Incredible mercy. Why? Just wow. And if he can spare Nineveh, just to say, it means he can spare anyone, right? If you're here and you're wondering, can God forgive you?

He can, right? Because he can have mercy on the worst people. A few weeks ago, I was talking to someone who kind of wondered, could God ever forgive me for the things I've done? And I said, well, do you remember the Apostle Paul?

[15:46] Why do you think you're worse than him? I mean, how many Christians have you got imprisoned and killed? Yeah. Good point. God can save the worst people. I mean, that is his plan in a way, right?

He's going to, his plan is to save the whole world. And that's what we kind of see here, a glimpse of. He has mercy on Nineveh. Though at the same time, it's important that we understand that correctly, or at least how we should respond to that, right?

How do we receive mercy? Because one thing that's very clear is that, well, turning is necessary. Turning is necessary. And all the talk about God's mercy is very important.

You need to turn to him. God doesn't destroy Nineveh. That's amazing. But it's only after they turn. You get that from some wordplay.

I don't know if you notice the word turning in verses 8 to 10. Let me read them again. They're here on the screen. Let man and beast be covered with sack cloth. Let them call out mightily to God.

[16:47] Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger that we may not perish.

And when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster. Right? There's this turning. They turn and they hope that God turns.

And indeed, God turns. Right? And it's not just turning. Actually, there's also evil and disaster. That's also the same word. I mean, not in English, but in, you know, think of the word bad.

Bad can be, you can have a bad person and you can have a bad day. And it's not the same thing. Right? So in a way, that's here as well. You could say, you know, the Ninevites turned from the bad things they were doing and God turned from the bad thing that he was planning to do.

Right? It's kind of like that. But they're connected. God turns after they turn. You may think that's only a few words.

[17:49] Jonah is part of the minor prophets. Actually, it's a big theme in many of them. Often that same invitation. Turn and I will turn. Or return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts in a couple of books.

The writer is saying, look at this example. You know, you need to turn to God. Look what happened with Ninevites. They turned to God. God turned to them. Of course, we need to understand that rightly.

That doesn't mean that God had changed his mind. Clearly, it was like, oh, God was going to destroy them. And then suddenly they changed. Oh, whoa.

Okay. I didn't expect that. No. I mean, God was planning to show mercy. Right? That's why he sent Jonah. He could have destroyed them straight away if he wanted to. No. He sent Jonah.

He was really patient. Right? He was waiting all the time that Jonah was, you know, fleeing away and in the fish and back to the beach. And even then it would take him a month of travel. And God was just patiently waiting.

[18:51] It was not like he was flying off the handle. And he patiently waited for Jonah to get there. He warned them. In a way, his warning is an invitation to turn. God always wanted to turn and show mercy.

But they still had to turn. Otherwise, they would have faced destruction. God is not like some parents, right? They, you know, who just indulge their kids.

And they say, you know, hey, you need to stop talking like that. Otherwise, no screen time. And then the kid keeps talking like that. And what does the parent do? Nothing. And what does the child learn?

Okay. It doesn't matter what I do. Right? I can do whatever I want because my parents just, all right? God is not like that. Parents, always follow through on your threats.

Okay? Some advice. But it's important. Yes. Good. But God does that. God follows through. If you don't believe me, you know, just read on.

[19:51] Two books later, we get Nahum, another minor prophet. And that's also Nineveh. 150 years later. But that book is blistering judgment because at that time, there was no repentance.

Right? God says, on whom has not come your unceasing evil. They didn't stop doing evil. Judgment came. And so God is so full of mercy, but you do need to turn.

Otherwise, there's no change in the relationship. And that's no different in the New Testament. Right? Jesus shows up. What does he say? Repent and believe. Right? Turning, repenting is the same idea.

Right? Here is God and you're facing this way. And God wants you to turn back to him. Right? We need to turn from our own way, from our evil way, to him. Yeah?

And so if you're here and you haven't done that yet, yeah, you need to. It's wonderful to come to church. It's wonderful to hear about God's mercy. But you need to turn. Right? God invites you to turn to him.

[20:51] He promises that he will turn to you. But you need to turn. Can I encourage you to do that? Again, we talk about God's love and God's mercy.

And it's so easy to then just ignore this. To think, yeah, God loves me and it's wonderful. While forgetting that actually we are still away from him.

Right? We need to turn. And we don't. And of course, if you have done that, don't be complacent. Right? The Ninevites, later they turned back to their old ways.

And things went wrong. Don't be complacent. Oh, yeah, God loves me. And then just start going your own way again. Right? Repentance, turning. It's a feature of the Christian life.

Maybe, how do we share the message of Jesus? It's wonderful to say to people, hey, God loves you. But do we also invite people to turn? You need to come back to him.

[21:47] And it's not always easy because people don't like to hear it. Maybe for some people, their way of living is their identity. And it almost sounds like you're trying to tell them to stop being themselves.

But, yeah, you know, becoming a Christian does involve turning away. We shouldn't forget that. So, yeah, turning is necessary. And by the way, this is not about Jonah.

It's actually the same with our forgiveness of each other. This week I had a couple of conversations about conflict, about sin.

People who were really hurt by something terrible that someone had done to them. And they were wondering, how about forgiveness? Right? Do I need to just forgive this person? Do I just, you know, pretend as if nothing happened?

Is that what God wants? Right? Because God wants us to forgive. What does forgiveness look like? It struck me, it's exactly the same as in this passage. Right?

[22:50] Because with God, there's clearly two stages. On the one hand, God has a forgiving heart. Right? He wants the Ninevites to turn. And he, you know, this is why he sends Jonah to preach.

And yet, that's not the end of it. They do need to turn. And if they don't turn, there's no relationship. Right? They need to turn from their evil way.

Otherwise, they still face judgment. And that's actually the same with us. If someone sins against you, if someone really hurts you, we shouldn't be bitter.

We should have a forgiving heart towards them. We should want to reconcile. But they do need to turn. If they don't turn from their sin, if they don't admit they've done anything wrong, if they don't turn from what they've hurt you, then there's no restoration.

Right? There's no relationship. They're still away from you. And I think that's important. We should forgive, but only if people repent. Some people, they did a terrible thing.

[23:52] And you think, oh, I could just relate to them as if nothing happened. That's not what the Bible says. Right? It's just like what God does here. People need to turn. If someone repents, forgive them.

And by the way, reconciliation is just one thing. Trust is another. Right? Even if you're reconciled to someone, they might still need to earn your trust. But for some of us here, that may be relevant. Right? We should be like God.

We should have a forgiving heart. No bitterness. No resentment. We should give all that to God and trust him. But yeah, people need to turn from the wrong they've done.

If they don't turn, there's no reconciliation. And also no reconciliation with God. If they don't turn, God is still against them. And they will face his judgment. I thought it worth pointing that out because we see that so clearly here.

But yeah, turning, repentance is necessary. But at the same time, I guess maybe you could have seen this coming. The other thing we see here, though, that's so wonderful.

[24:53] Turning is sufficient. Turning is sufficient. What did the Ninevites need to do to come back to God? What did they need to do to be spared? The only thing they needed to do was to repent.

Right? The only thing they needed to do was to turn. And that was enough. I mean, back then, ethnicity was a big thing. Right? God's people were Israel. They were God's chosen nation.

And there were all these Gentiles. The Assyrians, they were so far from the Israelites. They were not even distant cousins or anything. And yet, they could come to God and have mercy.

I mean, they didn't even know this God. Right? They didn't even know him. One thing that's interesting is the use of names. Right? If you go through Jonah, usually it talks about the Lord.

Right? The Lord in capital letters. You may know that that's God's name. Right? Y-H-W-H. Except that in these few verses, it doesn't say the Lord.

[25 : 52] It says God. Right? God is just a generic title. Why? Well, because the Nehemiah didn't know God. It's a bit like when I'm on the street and someone says, excuse me, mister. Right? They don't know my name. They don't know who I am. They just call me mister. It's the same with these people. They don't say, they don't know the Lord. They just, you know, call out to the God. That God. And maybe he will spare us. And they turn to that God. Right? You don't, they didn't even know him. But they believed. They cried out. They kind of, they knew they had to turn. They turned. And in a way, that's enough. Right? Just turning. They didn't have to become Jews and get circumcised or anything like that. It's turning is the only thing that matters. Right? Anyone can turn. And the way that's, just like in the Bible, you know, in the New Testament, it just says, repent and believe.

[26 : 51] That's all you need to do. Just repent from your sin and trusting Jesus. And all the rest doesn't matter. It's great to know here. Again, if you're here and you're not a Christian and you want to come back to God, it's just turning to Jesus and trusting him. And there's nothing else you need to do. It doesn't matter what family you're from. It doesn't matter what school you went to. It doesn't matter what your ethnicity or your gender or your age is. It doesn't matter how much or how little you know about God. It doesn't matter how often you've been to church. If you want to turn, you can turn. That's all you need to do. By the way, it also works the other way around. If you don't turn, it doesn't matter how long you've been in church. It doesn't matter what family you're from. It doesn't matter what school you went to. If you don't turn, of course, you'll miss out on mercy. But the positive thing here, anyone can turn. Anyone can turn to God. I think that's a big part of the message. Anyone can turn to God.

[27 : 59] Just cry out and turn. And if you want to do that, I'd love to help you. Come and talk to me later. But how about for us as Christians? If turning is sufficient, of course, and maybe you're someone here and you have done that. We have turned. We have trusted Jesus. Well, I think it's the same kind of thing, right? Anyone can turn. Anyone can turn. I mean, God is so merciful. And turning is all you need. Well, it means anyone can turn. I think the Israelites, they were pretty shocked when they read this chapter, right? The Ninevites were these terrible people. They were so far from God. And yet they repented. Right? They were welcomed. It's not what you would expect. Later, when we go into Acts after Jonah, Gentiles, non-Jews become Christians. And again, the Jews are kind of, whoa, right? We didn't expect this. But actually, anyone can turn. It's almost a question, are we open to that? Are we aware of that?

[29 : 01] Are we expecting that? I'm not saying how do we feel about that. That's next week. As we see how Jonah feels about it. But are we aware God might do that? Right? Maybe you meet people and, you know, they're not Christians. Do you kind of unconsciously categorize them? I tend to, I meet someone and I think, oh, this person, maybe they could become a Christian. Yeah, because of maybe their demographic or whatever. And, okay, I pray, how can I get the gospel into this conversation and those kind of things. But then there's other people and unconsciously I just write them off. I just feel like, oh, this person, you know, maybe because of their religion or whatever or their identity, no way they'll ever become a Christian. I just, I don't even try.

Right? Isn't that weird? Right? I guess it's maybe our unconscious bias. But this passage says, no, look, anyone, God can save anyone. His mercy is big enough.

[29 : 58] Right? Anyone can turn. It doesn't matter their background. It doesn't matter their religion. Anyone can turn. Anyone can come to Jesus. You know, am I aware of that? Am I open to that?

Right? When you, you know, maybe at your workplace or at your school or just, you know, as you walk down the streets, anyone could turn. Anyone is welcome.

God is merciful enough. And so, I just want to leave that with us. And, you know, we'll go more into that next week. But are we open to that? Right? And we want to see many people saved.

But do we want to see all kinds of people saved? Or only, do we just only expect God to save a certain kind of people? Maybe people who are like us. Now, repentance is what people need.

But it's all that people need. It's all they need. So, let's be open to God's mercy and ready to share. Right? And be amazed to see who can turn to the Lord as he has mercy.

[30 : 58] Why don't we do that? Why don't we pray? And just reflect on this and engage with it. Again, Father, we see such incredible mercy here.

We see your mercy to Jonah, to the Ninevites. Many of us know your mercy for ourselves. We know we were sinners. We did not live for your glory.

As we just confessed. And yet you had mercy. You sent your son to die for us. And you offer mercy. And we've turned. But, Lord, spread out this. It wouldn't just be something that we keep to ourselves.

Lord, would we see that your love extends to everyone. And that your arms that's embraced us would embrace the whole world if people turned. So, would we be open?

Would we have our eyes open? Would we long for many people to receive the same good news that we've received? And would you save many people? Would you have mercy? In Jesus' name.

[31 : 59] Amen. Amen.