

*Outline: We have what we need  
We have what they need*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what's the hardest thing you've ever done? Really think about it for a moment. Recently we recognized Martin Luther King Jr. and his impact on our country. What he went through could not have been easy. Being jailed, spit at, verbally assaulted, *physically* assaulted, hated so much that someone actually assassinated him. It probably took a lot of bravery to choose that path. Makes you wish you could ask him if he ever felt ready for what he had to go through. Think back to your own difficult situations. Was it dealing with a new job, or a new addition to the family? Was it trying to fix a relationship or maybe fixing something about yourself. Whatever it was, did you ever prepared to face it? Were you ready for it? God gave Jonah a really hard job when he simply told him to “Go to Nineveh.” And really, Jesus gave us that same hard job when he said “Go into the world and make disciples of all nations.” This can really seem like a hard thing to do, and it may seem like such a difficult task that maybe it'd be easier to ignore it. But there's really no reason *not* to take up this job when we see how prepared we really are to do it. We have what we need and we have what they need.

If you remember the account of Jonah what's the part of the story you remember the best? Probably the part where he gets swallowed by a great big fish for three days, right? That's the scene that gets put in artwork and placed in kids' Bible story books. It's pretty amazing to hear about. But do you remember why Jonah got swallowed by a fish?

It all started with these words which God spoke to Jonah, “Go to the great city of Nineveh.” You'll recognize these words from our lesson, but instead I want you to think of them when they were said at the beginning of the book of Jonah. This was God's special mission for Jonah, a mission which we have to understand how completely ridiculous it sounded.

For starters, Nineveh was a terrifying place. This was the capitol city for the Assyrians. Pastor and I have mentioned the Assyrians a few times now, but I don't think we've ever really described how mean these people were. They ruled their whole empire based on fear, and they were experts in giving people reasons to be afraid. It was common practice for them to take conquered enemies and to make piles of their heads, eyes, or ears. This was meant to remind everybody in the world not to mess with Nineveh. These were the people that Jonah was supposed to go and tell them how bad they were being! Right...

In Jonah's mind, these were not the type of people you go preaching to about sin and God. These were not the type of people that Jonah would want anything to do with. They were murderers, oppressors, people who had threatened Jonah's country more than a couple of times. Why was God wanting to help them? He needed to be taking care of his own people, the people of Israel. They were the ones that were already believers, the ones that deserved to be helped by God. What was God doing here? So Jonah ran away.

And not a little ways away either. He tried to go to a place called Tarshish, which was in Spain, and that was, for Jonah's time, the other side of the world compared to Nineveh. Nineveh

was just a little ways to the East, and Tarshish was way far to the West. All the way across the Mediterranean Sea!

It was on this boat ride where Jonah ran into a storm. Not just any storm, but one that was going to destroy the ship he was on. A storm so terrible that Jonah realized the mistake he had made and suggested to his shipmates that they throw him overboard. When Jonah was sinking in the depths of sea, feeling his lungs constrict from the lack of air, waiting to die, then finally that big fish came. God’s way out for Jonah, his second chance.

When you hear about Jonah, it’s easy to start thinking about the question, “What does one do with one’s time inside the belly of a giant fish?” Probably it meant time for Jonah to go back over everything that led up to this slimy and smelly situation. Time for him to come to the conclusion where he says, “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that *could* be theirs... Salvation comes from the LORD.” It seems that Jonah realized that his mission to spread God’s message to Nineveh wasn’t so strange. That God’s salvation was meant for them too. That God was serious when he had first told the Israelites during the time of Moses that they were to follow God’s laws so they could “show [their] wisdom and understanding to the nations.” Jonah’s time in the fish pointed him to the need to take up God’s mission for him and indeed that it was time “to go to Nineveh.”

Do we need our own “fish moment” in Thornton? Do we need something to remind us of our own mission to “Go to Nineveh?” Sure, we don’t have to go preach to any blood thirsty Assyrians, but who scares us off? Who do we feel like wouldn’t want anything do with the message we have for them, or maybe doesn’t deserve to get that message? People who are poorer than us...or richer than us? People of a different age, too young or too old to want to listen. Or maybe a different race, too hard to relate to. But that’s something we forget sometimes, our “Nineveh” doesn’t always have to be complete strangers. Yet we can sometimes be scared off by people we know too. Scared by the idea of hurting a relationship, looking weird, or making things awkward. What do we need to hear, what do we need to have happen to make us take the time to realize that none of those things are an excuse. None of those things excuse us from the job God’s given us, because we have what we need.

Look at Jonah. What does he realize in the fish? Not just how badly other people need God, but how badly Jonah needs him. He says to God, “you brought my life from the pit, O LORD my God.” It was when he realized what God did for him that he knew what God could do for everyone else. And when the time came for him to finally do the job God gave him, did God bring up his mistakes a whole bunch of times? Say something like, “*Are* you ready Jonah? We both know what happened last time.” No. He just repeats the mission, “Go to the great city of Nineveh.”

The forgiveness Jonah was bringing the people of Nineveh was the forgiveness he already received. That’s also the same forgiveness we’ve been given. A forgiveness that doesn’t bring up past sins over and over again, but empowers us so that we can move on. Move on to make sure others hear about this forgiveness too.

We can do this with confidence, because what did God tell Jonah to bring to Nineveh? God says, “The message I give you.” Jonah didn’t have to worry about making up something to tell people, he just had to tell them what God *would* do for them. We have it even easier than Jonah, because what’s the message we bring people? The message of what God has *already* done for people. How Jesus’ blood on the cross completely paid for our sin. How his resurrection from the grave completely defeated death. If we had to worry about doing any of *that* ourselves, then yes, this would be an impossible job. But we don’t. Instead all we do is take the forgiveness and the message he’s given us and pass along the news that Jesus’ victory belongs to everyone.

So let’s “Go to Nineveh.” Not just because we have what we need, but also because we have what they need.

Think about this situation. If you walked into a building and started shouting to people that the building was going to collapse at any moment, what would people think about you? Crazy person. Now, let’s say you really, honestly knew that the building was going to collapse and you *didn’t* tell anybody about it. Then after all those people died, other people found out that you didn’t bother warning anyone. What would they think about you then? Crazy person again. Because who in their right mind wouldn’t warn people of that?

Everybody around us who doesn’t know what Jesus has done for them is in a collapsing building. We realize this when we think about two truths the Bible tells us. That “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” And that “the wages of sin is death.” These are not merely possible situations, they are fact. Facts that people need to be told about, because they don’t think of them naturally.

Look at the people of Nineveh. This was a sprawling metropolis. Between Nineveh proper and the suburbs around it, we’re told it would take three whole days to walk around in it. Yet, what happened after just one day of Jonah talking about God’s judgment and how, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned”? The whole city repented. It says they put on “sackcloth.” That was really itchy stuff and people wore it to show they were in mourning and they were sorry. How could this happen after just one day of Jonah preaching? The people themselves spread God’s message around too. They spread it around so much that the king himself heard it and put on sackcloth. They spread it around, because they knew this was something they needed to hear.

And it was something God wanted them to hear. Nineveh was called a “great” city by God a couple of times. But what made it great before God? Listen to what God says later on, “Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” Nineveh was a great city because it had *people*. We heard already a couple of inescapable truths about sin, well here’s another truth from 1 Timothy on how God feels about sinful people, “[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Part of the truth for Nineveh was their sin. But the other part of the truth they needed to hear was what happened after Nineveh saw that sin, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil

ways, he had compassion.” That was God’s great message to Nineveh, the message of their sin and his compassion.

These truths about the consequence of sin and God’s desire to save all people, these truths transcend any obstacles that we might perceive exist between us and the people God puts in our lives. Any obstacles of social class or race or awkward situations. Because what are the people around us? People whom God wants to show his compassion to and to see with him in heaven. People that he’s dragged out of that collapsing building. And not just dragged out, but he also stayed in that building and died in our place. Now that we’re out of there, we can look back and not be afraid of anything.

People need to have the same opportunity as Nineveh did and hear about their forgiveness and joy. And it can be our joy to be the ones bringing this message to them. This is a joy that the children at Lord of Life have been able to be a part of. Through their mission offerings they’ve been helping support two different missions. They’ve crossed cultural barriers by helping Lighthouse, which is an inner city Youth Center in Milwaukee. A place that offers kids an opportunity not just to stay out of trouble, but to better themselves and to grow in their faith. The Lord of Life kids have even crossed international barriers by helping a mission in Brazil. Helping provide God’s Word for hungry souls on another continent. But, really, we don’t have to look any farther than our own great city to find opportunities to share God’s message. Remember what was great about Jonah’s opportunity? The fact that he was preaching to *people*. For us, whether or not we’re talking to someone we just met or if it’s close family members, when we share God’s message to people, those *are* great opportunities. Opportunities for us to be a part of God’s loving plan and to give people exactly what they need.

There are a lot of hard jobs in life to be done, and it takes brave people to do them. But when we think about God telling us to go to our own “Nineveh” we don’t have to see it as an intimidating challenge. Instead we can see it as our privilege. A privilege that we’ve been well equipped to carry out. We’ve been given what we need to get this job done, so let’s do it. We have what everybody needs to be given, so let’s give it to them. Right now. Amen.