



## Lenten Reflection for Thursday, March 10th

Mark Popham

You can listen to the reading and reflection by clicking [here](#).

### Jonah 3:1 - 10

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

*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. 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. 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. 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.*

When I was a kid, I knew the story of Jonah for one reason - the whale stuff. It was a classic Sunday school story, one of those that twists in the memory, so that when you read it as an adult it is both extremely familiar and totally new. As far as I was concerned, as a kid, the story ended with Jonah getting spat up on shore; I don't have a memory of his further ministry in Nineveh at all.

Structurally Jonah is pretty interesting - the first chapter details his flight from God, the storm and the method by which Jonah is thrown overboard and ingested. Chapter two is almost wholly taken up by Jonah's very evocative prayer to God, with just one verse detailing Jonah being "vomited" onto land. The reading today makes up the whole of the third chapter, and you might think that finishes out the story - Jonah tries to flee from God, Jonah repents, and Jonah finds great success in ministering to the Ninevites. But there's a fourth chapter, and that's the one that really stuck with me the first time I read the book as an adult.

In Jonah 4 Jonah is angry because the Ninevites have repented and God has forgiven them. He's so mad he wants to *die*! He feels like, if he had to spend three days inside of a whale then at the very LEAST God could destroy Nineveh. It was so easy for him to get the Ninevites back on track - he only walked through a third

of the city and the KING sat up and took notice! he barely had to try! - that he feels like this entire thing was a wasted trip. It's actually a pretty funny, almost Larry David-like scenario, where Jonah - who two chapters earlier was pleading for mercy from, again, the inside of a whale - is furious that mercy could flow so freely to others. And that is where I see myself in this story - in Jonah, angrily sitting in a little hut outside of Nineveh, waiting for the destruction he's already averted.

I grew up in a church where one of the primary tenets of our faith was that the only people avoiding eternal hellfire were members of our church - and I don't just mean our faith, I mean, like, that specific building. We weren't too sure about the whole congregation, either - some people seemed very sure they were going to heaven, and others were just as certain of their own destination in hell. Maybe it's a reflection of the type of person you are but I remember, from a very early age, the bone-deep feeling I had that no matter how I tried *I wasn't going to make it*. The God I knew as a child was petulant and alien, His actions inexplicable, brutal and often unfair, and my greatest nightmare is that when I die that is the God I will meet.

The biggest challenge I have to my faith is despair. I despair over the failures of Christianity - or, rather, how human beings have failed Christianity. On my worse days I can't stop thinking about how quickly and how thoroughly Christ's radical message of love and acceptance was bent to empire, bigotry and persecution, from the Inquisition to colonialism, slavery and genocide. I read about the mercy of God and I think, *we don't deserve it - we shouldn't receive it*. Like Jonah I find myself so caught up in the bad things that have happened I cannot see the good even when the good is what I wanted all along.

"All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." When the king of Nineveh proclaims this, he is desperately hoping to avert the destruction of his kingdom, but it sounds as predictive of the Kingdom of God as "The wolf shall lie down with the lamb." Through God and an imperfect, often faithless prophet, Nineveh was saved; who am I to say that God, and us, acting as his imperfect servants, cannot save the world.



*Mark lives with his wife Kristin and daughters Isabel and Adelaide in Kensington. They have been members at Holy Apostles since 2019. He is also very privileged to edit the podcast versions of these reflections, and has benefited greatly from the beautiful reflections of his co-parishoners.*