

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (Jonah 3:1-10)

The Power of Faith

Is Christianity in decline? Every day, I check “Google news” to see what’s happening in the world. Almost every day, under the “religion” topic, there’s a headline that says something like “Americans’ confidence in religion hits a new low.” The statistics are bad. Participation and membership in Christian churches across America have been going down for at least a decade. But you know what? Jesus said that in the end times, the love of most would grow cold. He was giving us a warning about deciding what’s true by what’s popular. There’s a long list of things that most people think are true but that are really false. How many times in your life have you heard that you’re supposed to drink eight glasses of water a day? It’s nonsense, but lots of people think it’s true. Last summer, a blockbuster movie was based on the assertion that we only use ten percent of our brains. That’s a myth, but most people think it’s true. Most people on earth don’t believe in Jesus. But again, that’s what Jesus said would happen. It doesn’t mean that what God tells us is false. You and I know better. God has given us a gift in our faith. This morning, in all our scripture readings, God gives us glimpses of what faith does in our lives. In our Old Testament lesson especially, we see **the power of faith.**

I.

In the ministry of Jonah we see that **faith changes lives.** Jonah lived almost eight hundred years before Jesus was born. God called him to go to be a foreign missionary to Nineveh, one of the capital cities of Assyria. Assyria had a reputation for being a violent, predatory country. God sent Jonah to bring them a warning that he was watching and that he was going to judge them for their sin and violence. You probably know the most famous part of the story. Jonah didn’t want to go so he took a ship in the opposite direction. God sent a storm and when the sailors threw him overboard, God sent a great fish that swallowed him. After three days, it vomited him out on dry land.

That’s where our account picks up today. God repeated his call. This time, Jonah went. He preached: **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”** In our modern world, the crank with the long beard, holding up a sign that says, “The end is near!” has become a stock cartoon figure. But Jonah had one of the most successful ministries ever recorded. He went to one of the largest cities of the ancient world and warned them about God’s judgment. And the people listened and repented. The king himself got down off his throne and repented in sackcloth and ashes. What does that mean? Sackcloth was cheap and rough and extremely uncomfortable to wear. Wearing that ugly, uncomfortable cloth, and sitting in ashes were signs of humility. The king showed God that he knew who was really in charge. And he called on all his people to do the same. He also commanded a fast. No food or drink for anyone. Why? Well, what happens when you don’t eat? You feel weak and out of focus. Fasting reminds you of how easy it would be to die and how much you need God to sustain you.

Now it would be hard to enforce a fast on a large city. People could close their doors and eat in secret. But it's clear that most people joined in. Why? Because they believed God's word. Their faith in what God said drove them to go against human nature and humble themselves before God. It drove them to make their own lives uncomfortable to show God that they had heard his word and were taking it seriously.

Wouldn't we all love to see America repent the way Assyria did in Jonah's day? I can't count the number of times I've heard Christians express their sadness over what our country has become. If God would judge America today, where abortion is a fact and gay marriage has already won, where you can't even say what God says about these topics without being accused of hate speech, where mass murders in schools and theaters have all but numbed us to the violence in our society – if God were to judge us for all that, could anyone say he was unjust? Wouldn't we all love to see a prophet spark a society-wide repentance like Jonah's preaching did? Maybe we will someday.

But even if we don't, the power of faith is alive and well. Look at your own lives. How different would you be if you didn't have faith? When I look back over the course of my life, I can't count all the ways that faith has changed me. I am the man that I am today because of the faith God gave me. If God somehow allowed me to meet the man I would've been without faith in some alternate universe, I don't know if I would even recognize myself. Knowing my own sinful heart, I'm sure I would be appalled at what I could have been. I bet that's true for most of you, too.

How much would we follow the unchristian attitudes of our society if we didn't have God counteracting them in his word, in our church services and in our lives of faith? How quickly would we embrace all those godless attitudes? You are here today on a Sunday morning when you could be sleeping in. That's your faith! You write checks and put them in offering envelopes. Some of you give thousands of dollars every year to support our ministry here. What else could you do with that money? How many movies could you see? How many nights in a hotel on vacation could you pay for? How many meals in a restaurant? But you give it here so that we can hear the word of God and operate a school and reach out to the lost in a society that doesn't want to hear it anymore. Many of you give hours serving on boards and committees or teaching Sunday school or VBS or cleaning the school. Your faith is a power in your life.

But it goes beyond just those "churchy" things. When the Bible discusses the impact of the gospel on our lives, it talks about loving our spouses and children. It talks about caring for aging parents. It talks about giving to the poor and being faithful in our jobs. It talks about being honest and paying our taxes and being the salt of the earth. It talks about stuff that we do every day without thinking, "I'm doing this for Jesus." But that stuff does come from our faith because faith changes who we are.

But don't pat yourself on the back too quickly. God gave us that faith and he made us who we are. Luther taught us to confess, "I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him." We didn't decide to believe in Jesus. God gave us faith. That matters because we trust in Christ, not in ourselves. Every day of our lives, the sinner inside us resists the power of faith and we do sin. But Christ paid for that sin. He died. He rose. God forgave us and he did a miracle and gave us faith in our Savior.

That same God promises to watch over us, no matter how much life hurts, and to hear and answer our prayers. God promises that when we humble ourselves before him, like the people of Nineveh, he will pick us up. God promises that when our faith leads us to give a more generous offering to church, or to dedicate our time to his work, he will take care of us. God promises that when we're honest and dependable and faithful, when we give our time to our spouse or our children even when we wanted to do something else, when we help the poor and pay our taxes and live as "the salt of the earth" he will bless all those things and turn them to our good. There's an old tongue in cheek saying, "No good deed goes unpunished." Often in life, when we do the right thing, all the cheaters and thieves and egotists push ahead of us. But faith trusts in God and does the right thing anyway. God works and turns all those sacrifices and losses into eternal blessings.

II.

Trusting in all those promises is what faith really is. That trust has phenomenal power. When a building is on fire and someone is trapped on an upper story, the firemen will deploy a big inflatable bag to catch them. But jumping off that building could be as terrifying as facing the flames. The fireman has to convince the person to take the plunge. How do they do that? By promising them that this will rescue them. God does the same thing. There are times when it feels like our lives are in flames and all the choices are scary.

In those moments, God gives us the trust we need to cling to his promises. How does he do that? By repeating his promises. But God's promises aren't like a fireman's. God's promises are the very power of God, the power that made this world. In Jonah's work, we see **the power of faith. Faith comes from God's Word.**

The book of Jonah does not record one miracle that Jonah ever did. All he did was preach. But he preached God's Word and it struck the hearts of the people and they repented. God's Word can strike terror in the heart of hardened sinners. And it can lift those terrified sinners up and give them the confidence that their Lord loves them and died for them and forgives them. That's the basic reality of how God gives faith.

But the case of Nineveh creates a lot of questions. First of all, God does not record Jonah preaching any gospel. There is only the threat of the law. Secondly, after Jonah leaves, the Bible never mentions believers in Nineveh again. In fact, God's judgment finally falls on the city after a long period of being a terror to Israel. So was the repentance of Nineveh real? Was there real faith in God or was it just terror at his punishment and a desperate attempt to buy God off with humility and good works? If the repentance was real, that is, if it really included trust in God's forgiveness, why don't we see believers in Nineveh after this?

In the end, we can't answer these questions. But we can use the questions to remind ourselves of some important things about how God gives faith and how he keeps it alive. First of all, repentance means more than just being sorry for my sins. It also means that I believe the good news that Jesus died for me and God has forgiven me. Trust in that message is the heart of real repentance. Now, God does care how life goes in this world, so an unbelieving society that works hard to stop crime and violence and to create a just society is a good thing in his eyes. But it's not enough to get to heaven. For that you need trust in Jesus, living and dying and rising for you.

Where does that trust come from? Only from the gospel. God works faith only when we hear about our Savior. And God keeps our faith alive only through the good news about Jesus. That's why I tell you he died for you every week. We all know today that Jesus died for us. But will that faith still be alive a year from now? Ten years from now? Our files here at church are full of names of people who declared that they believed in Jesus and that they would suffer death and all rather than fall away. But where are they today?

How can we keep our faith alive? How can our children keep their faith alive? There's only one way: you need to hear about Jesus. You need to regularly hear the law thunder at you and convict you. We need to grapple with being sinners. And then we need to hear that good news: Jesus died for us. Jesus rose for us. God has forgiven us. That message is the power of God. That message – and that message alone – is what gives us the faith that then changes our lives. Do we want to lead better lives? Do we want our children to live lives that show that faith? Do we want to see our offerings increase and more people join our church? Then we need to proclaim the message about Jesus right here, right now. That message is God's only plan to keep his church alive in this sinful world until Jesus comes back.

Jesus said that the love of most would grow cold. It certainly feels like we live in the fulfillment of that prophecy and lots of unbelievers are gleefully predicting the death of our faith. But don't be fooled. It's no more true than the old chestnut about drinking eight glasses of water every day. Jesus promised that the church would never fail. Your Savior died for you. His blood washed away all your sin and fear and doubt. It paid for the unbeliever in your heart that fights against your faith every day. Jesus loves you and he will sustain your faith for as long as you live here. And he will make that faith change your life so that you can live for him. That's his promise. Trust it and dedicate yourself to living that life of faith. Amen.