

## Sermon

*Northminster Presbyterian Church: Ordinary 3, Year B (2009)*

*The lessons: Jonah 3<sup>1-10</sup>; Mark 1<sup>14-20</sup>*

“You’ve got to change your evil ways, baby!”: Gospel According to Santana

We look around at the world and we see a lot of things that need to be changed. A few weeks ago, in the afterglow of champagne and Auld Lang Syne, we made New Year’s resolutions, because we saw some things in ourselves that need to be changed.

Not always evil, to use the words of Carlos Santana, but maybe sometimes, maybe on a small scale

“The Divide”: Normal people in horrid circumstances devolve into evil; think “Lord of the Flies”  
John Calvin: Depravity of man

Ninevah is evil on a grand scale:

Global city: Think London, New York, Tokyo, Galax

- 1) Metropolitan and cultured
- 2) Economic epicenter
- 3) War machine

Capital of Assyrian empire and hated enemies of the Hebrews

Israel civil war—we Virginians know about civil wars—Israel and Judah

Assyria destroyed Israel and subjugated Judah for a hundred years

Nasty, brutal people: Spears and victory parades, imagine the animosity

Enter Jonah: “Dove”—God says to “cry out” against Ninevah, “wickedness”

Jonah says “No!”—this is the famous part of the story: ship, fish, three days, dry land

Monty Python: “I taunt you a second time!” Our lesson: God speaks a second time—tenacity

Jonah has learned his lesson and does as he is told: God will have our obedience, one way or the other

Message: Forty/days/Ninevah/overthrown—only five words in Hebrew, hope of all middlin’ preachers: even a crappy sermon can get results!

“Forty”:

- 1) Flood
- 2) Wilderness
- 3) Christ’s temptation

Notice:

- 1) Doesn’t say anything about God
- 2) Doesn’t indicate what being “overthrown” means
- 3) Doesn’t say that there’s any chance of change
- 4) Doesn’t suggest repentance

In other words, not a “hellfire and damnation” sermon

I suspect we all know when we’re doing wrong; conscience, calibration to obedience

Must have been the case with king—animals even in sackcloth, everyone fasting

Nothing to lose. Ninevites had nothing to lose.

Play at religion but truly meet and know God when we’ve got nothing to lose.

We have nothing to lose now; we think we do

- 1) Kids/grandkids
- 2) \$17 still left in the stock portfolio
- 3) Reputations
- 4) Jobs

Those are given us by God and can be taken by God; we have nothing of our own, we have nothing to lose

No reason not to throw ourselves upon the grace of God

God relented, our lesson says. He did not bring the calamity upon them that he had planned. Now, if you think that means Ninevah was not overthrown, then this story has its hook in your mouth, it has you right where it wants you, because Ninevah was overthrown. The Hebrew word for “overthrown” also means “delivered”. The king is overturned in his dress, his decorum, his priorities, his behavior, his disposition. The Ninevites’ hearts are overthrown, their wickedness is overthrown, their way of life is overthrown.

In the very next verse after our lesson, Jonah is “very displeased” and “angry” that Ninevah has turned to the Lord. He doesn’t think Ninevah deserves God. They don’t. But here’s the thing, Christians. Neither does Jonah. Neither do we. What Jonah doesn’t get is the awesome, undeserved, unrelenting, life-giving mercy of God. It is the mercy that is culminated in Jesus Christ. It is the mercy that makes us God’s children and points us toward God’s kingdom. It is the mercy that heals wounds, builds communities, brings justice, breaks painful cycles, humbles the proud, and turns a despised warmongering empire into a repentant people crying out to the Lord. Three of this year’s fifty two weeks are now gone from us. My hope for you for these remaining forty nine, is that you realize you have nothing to lose with the Lord, that there is no reason not to entrust your life to him; and that consequently, every day of your life will be filled with the liberating and life-giving mercy of God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.