

# ***Prophetic Living: Entering The City***

## **Jonah 3**

PREPARED BY  
KEN GEHRELS  
PASTOR  
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF OTTAWA  
ONTARIO, CANADA

Seems like it's been a while since we put on our hip waders and dove into the book of Jonah. Two more weeks - including today.

Perhaps you remember how we said that this book of Jonah, which we've been studying through the Fall evening services at Calvin - it is our book. Remember the call of synagogue worshippers, who would declare after the reading of this book -

*We are Jonah!*

Indeed - The book is about us. Jonah is not a prophetic hero who escapes a close call and single-handedly transforms an evil empire. He's a fallible believer, an incomplete human being, a "yes-but" kind of player in the Kingdom of God....

....just like every one of us.

We are Jonah.

God works on Jonah. With patience. With resolve. He keeps working. Carving away at his character, right to the very last verse of the narrative.

Just like he keeps working on us. With patience. With resolve. He keeps working on us. Carving away at our character, right to our very last breathe.

We are Jonah.

Over the four chapters of this short bible book we see Jonah the Prophet as:

Prodigal;

Praying;

Preaching; and

Perturbed.

*We are Jonah.*

We began with Jonah receiving the call of God to go to Nineveh. Nineveh, you may remember, was the capitol city of the sworn enemies of the Jews. Would be like asking a Jewish prophet today to enter Tehran or Kabul and begin preaching.

Big. Noisy. Dangerous.

And absolutely no opportunity for personal payoff. Nothing!

On the other hand there was Tarshish.

We're not told exactly where Tarshish was - just somewhere to the West.

Precisely in the opposite direction of Nineveh.

Tarshish is never clearly described - in either the Bible or history. It is a vague sort of place, a place that in folklore and history seems to be described as a city of riches, of trade, of opportunity.

Tarshish held hope.

Tarshish offered promise.

Tarshish looked good.

Who **wouldn't** want to go there?

Jonah ignores God calls to gritty faithfulness and heads to city lights.

He runs away.

And gets caught.

Caught by God, pushed into a corner, Jonah offers himself as a human sacrifice. Jahweh, though, won't have any part of it, and plucks Jonah from a watery grave through the fishy lips of one servant who **did** listen the divine call. That's chapter one. Concluding with the Lord boxing Jonah into a tight, tight corner where he is left to do some very serious thinking. And in that tight corner his life turns around. In the womb-like depth of the fish, Jonah essentially dies and is reborn.

As we moved into chapter two we focussed on tight places, turmoil and challenges as they enter our lives. And, as part of that, we touched briefly on prayer. We spent a third week dealing with prayers that come during storms - Jonah's prayer contrasted with the storm prayers of St.Paul.

Which brings us to chapter three.

And now, before we head to the Lord's table, we pause here to meditate as contemporary Jonah's. We are Jonah.

Ah, Lord, what would you be saying to we, your not quite perfect servants?

Let us hear the Word of the Lord!

**Bible Reading:Jonah 3:1-10, p.860 (Old Testament)**

*"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 will tell you.'"*

I suspect that Jonah would have easily had a few things he would have been quite happy to say to the Ninevites.

He would have remembered the injustices that their people had inflicted on his. The stories, and perhaps memories, of suffering would be clear. And the knowledge that this was a city full of economic injustice - that was no secret.

Yup - lots that could be said!

But that's not what God asks from his prophet. What he demands is a servant-prophet who is willing to listen for the voice of the Master, and speak only as he is spoken to - to proclaim only as directed.

We are Jonah.

We carry the mantel of the Holy Spirit's anointing into the sacred office of all believers - a priestly, kingly **AND** prophetic office.

As prophets we are called to speak.

Speak what?

Well - I'm sure there's much we could say. Much we could say to our families. Much we could say to our neighbours. Much we could say to our politicians. Even if we were to base it on the eternal and infallible truth of the Bible there is so much we could say.

But **what** is to be said at a specific moment to a specific person in a specific setting?

What?

I think of the One who compared himself to Jonah - Jesus, who in Matthew 12 says to the scribes and Pharisees that he will reenact and fulfill the events of Jonah - 3 days in the heart of the earth and then resurrected to a mission and message and ministry.

That same Jesus, just two chapters earlier, sends out spokesmen with prophetic roles. As he sends them, Matthew 10, Jesus says,

*"... do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."* (v.19-20)

The role of the prophet is to listen for the inner prompting of God's Spirit; for the divine voice directing what to say.

So it was for Jonah.

So it was for the disciples.

Why would it be any different for us?

A particular message for a particular place and a particular time;

a message founded on and rooted in the timeless Word of God.

That is the challenge that faces the preacher for one.

I've been asking our Thursday morning prayer team to keep special intercession over the last few weeks as I've been looking ahead through Easter, 2006. It would be, quite frankly, very easy to find something, anything to preach.

But that's not the point.

The point and question is - what is the Lord's message **right now** for His beloved people here at Calvin Church?

Means I need to learn to listen.

I need to learn the difference between my restless inner "oh, get on with it so that we can do something else, so just pick a topic will ya?" voice

and the "what would I want to hear" voice

and the prompting of God's Spirit.

I need to make sure that there is a cultivated awareness that God **does** speak.

I need to be paying attention.

I need to, as Don Postma says, make "space for God."

As you rub shoulders with colleagues at work - do you ever take time to listen if the Lord might have a word for them through you?

Or for your neighbour?

A word of encouragement, or challenge, or hope?

A verse of scripture?

A line from a song?

And leaders - elders, deacons - are you learning to hear God's voice?

Are you praying for a word of direction for the life of this congregation?

For a nudge as to where we should be moving in ministry?

And, perhaps, where we should STOP doing certain things?

Or where we need to wait?

That's the first thing - we, Jonah, speaking the word that God gives us.

Second - we speak that word **in** the city.

Notice that?

Jonah doesn't stand at the city limits at shout **at** the city.

He goes right **into** the city.

He walks the streets, smells the smells, sees the sights, hears the sounds, eats the food.

With them. Among them.

As a good prophet of the Lord.

Right in the gritty places of life.

Not away running for the glamour of Tarshish.

And not sequestered on some tower outside of town.

Not sending the message in via a third party.

But going right in -

- himself.

In among the enemy.

Into the foreign culture.

Into the unsafe space.

Into uncomfortable territory.

Into a zone where he might be challenged.

Into a place where his hands, and perhaps his soul, might be a tad dirtied.

That's where the prophet goes.

That's where the church goes.

Not hiding from the culture, but engaging it.  
Not hiding from our neighbours, but welcoming them.  
Not waiting till they come to us, but finding ways to go to them.  
Not insisting on comfortable and safe limits to ministry, or projects with guaranteed pay backs, predictable stuff that is neat and clean.  
Going into Nineveh.

Question - in how many ways does the life of Calvin CRC intersect the life of the city of Ottawa? Or is it merely a quiet, parallel existence? On the fringes? At the city limits?

Third element -

He goes **eschatalogically**.

How's that for a great theological word?

Means looking forward to the end. When you hear some professor talk about the *eschaton*, she's probably talking about the end of time, Judgement time, the time when Jesus will come back as Cosmic Ruler on the clouds and on His Throne.

Looking forward to the end.

Preaching eschatalogically.

Living eschatalogically.

Remembering, then, that things won't always keep going as they have always seemed to go. One day things will come to a grinding stop.

God is going to come with a great event of judgement.

And are we ready?

Are our neighbours ready if Jesus returns tonight?

Are your parents? Your kids?

"Forty days more..." says the prophet.

Forty -

ah, what a great biblical number.

It's the number of preparation, of cleaning house, of equipping for a task.

Noah spent forty days in the ark with his family, while the earth was being cleansed of the filth of sin.

Israel was in the wilderness for forty years - ridding the nation of those who had rebelled against God's command to enter Canaan, and preparing the next generation for the task of taking the land.

Elijah hides in the wilderness forty days, where his failing health and tired soul and burned out heart are renewed, and he is given a fresh message from the Lord for the apostate Jezebel.

Jesus enters the wilderness for forty days where he does battle with Satan. His sense of identity is shaped, and his inner power is sharpened for 3 years of intense ministry and challenge as he would intentionally walk the road to the cross.

After the resurrection, Jesus appears to and teaches his disciples for -

- well, guess how many days?

It is a time where he prepares them for the post-death reality of Resurrection living.

Forty - someone has said that the thirty-nine days all point towards the rubber hits the road reality of the fortieth day. All the preparation is then tested.

And if it is solid, there is a whole new beginning for life.

Like there was for Noah, and Israel in Canaan, and Jesus in ministry, and the disciples in mission. Oh yes, and for Nineveh!

But if the preparation is sloppy or non-existent... then the fortieth day is not a day of new beginnings, of new life. No. Then it is a day of disaster, of judgement, of death.

Friends - in many ways the work of the Church is 40-day work.

We're calling people during a time of preparation for the return of Jesus.

He is lingering in returning.

How long - who knows?

Though I watch world events accelerate and wonder how much longer things can keep going on?

But, he lingers.

And as he lingers we have time to respond.

And we have time to get ready.

And we have time to share the hope of the gospel so that **they** can get ready.

So that when the final trumpet sounds, and the end comes,

the fortieth day

that it will be one of life for us and for those we know and love.

not a time of disaster, of judgement, of death.