

Although we learned last week that Jonah's prayer was not what we would have expected, God spoke to the large fish that had swallowed Jonah and the fish spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. God gave Jonah yet another chance.

Let's listen into the story to see whether or not God's persistence changed Jonah's mind. Will he love his neighbor, even though he considers the Ninevehites his enemy? Will he deliver God's message of grace, calling them to repent? Listen now for God's word to us from the third chapter of Jonah.

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." Now Jonah's story began when the word of the Lord came to Jonah. God said to Jonah, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come before me." The work was urgent. The need was immense. Eugene Peterson gave us a very descriptive account of the debauchery present in the sprawling City of Nineveh in week one – "full of lies, bursting with loot, addicted to violence...luring nations to their ruin." Nineveh was not a nice place, so God said to Jonah, "Go."

Well, as we know Jonah said "No," and then had a wild ride for three days and three nights inside the belly of a great fish. Today as we enter the story, he finds himself on dry land again. I imagine him looking worn and weak, barely breathing, wondering if he would have strength to stand up or if he should just collapse and let sleep overcome him.

But, God doesn't waste any time, at least not in this story. The word of the Lord simply comes to Jonah again, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim the message that I tell you." Get up! Go! Don't collapse and rest. Get up Jonah! It is not my fault you have had a tough three days! I need you to go and to go now!

Jonah's second chance... well actually more than second chance if one is counting: His first chance was when God called him to go. His second chance was when the great fish swallowed him from the deeps saving him from certain death. His third chance came when the great fish couldn't stomach him anymore and spewed him up on dry land. So, I guess this second word from the Lord makes a fourth chance for Jonah by my calculations.

How many chances have you needed?

Have you ever needed a second chance at work? When you didn't meet a critical deadline. When you did a half-hearted job on an assignment that you didn't want to do. When you got into an argument with a coworker that was made public. When your repeated tardiness was noticed. When your jealousy of a coworker clouded your judgment and interfered with your work.

Have you ever needed a second chance as a student: when you didn't complete a paper on time; when you froze during an oral presentation; when you failed a critical test because you partied instead of studying; when you were caught in the act of copying someone else's work; when you excluded another student from the *in crowd* simply because they were different?

Have you ever needed a second chance with your own family life: when you forgot a birthday or anniversary; when you sabotaged your sister or brother blaming them for something that you did; when you lashed out in anger at your children over the slightest thing; when you blamed your spouse for your unhappiness with life; when you blamed your parents for not allowing you to do what your friends can do; When you

thought you covered up a destructive habit, but you managed to cause pain to those you love the most?

Have you ever needed a second chance with a friendship: when you lashed out in anger without knowing all the facts; when you accused your friends of something they didn't do; when you told someone else what you had learned from her in confidence, breaking her trust; when you were jealous that he was spending more time with others?

Have you ever needed a second chance with your relationship with God: when you were just too busy to pray; when you said no to a clear sense of call like Jonah did; when you were angry at what life brought to your doorstep and decided to blame God; when you were tired of the demands of living out the command to love your neighbor, especially your particular neighbor; when you just didn't think God would care about your problems anyways; when you felt that God could not love you because of what you did?

I think it is fair to say that we have all needed second or third or even fourth chances at one time or another. We have messed up in little ways and even in big ways. Well, a quick read of scripture shows that we are not alone in this, in our need for second chances. Sarah grew impatient with God and couldn't wait any longer for God's promise to be fulfilled, so her husband, Abraham, fathered a child through Sarah's servant, Hagar. Jacob lied to his father and stole from his own family. David committed adultery and then murdered to cover it up. Peter denied Jesus not once, but three times even after he told Jesus he wouldn't. Paul enjoyed persecuting Christians and blaspheming God. Jonah said no and then blamed God for the mess he found himself in. Don't you think it's fair to say we are in good company?

The good news of this particular chapter of Jonah is that we witness the God of second, third and even fourth chances. God's love is patient and persistent. God just doesn't give up on us, even if we flee from God's presence. God didn't give up on Sarah and Abraham for they became the father of Isaac, who was blessed to be a blessing to all families of the earth. God didn't give up on Jacob for he became Israel, the namesake of the entire nation of God's people. God didn't give up on David for he became known as "a man after God's own heart." God didn't give up on Peter for on that first Pentecost he preached one sermon and had 3,000 new followers of the way of Christ! God didn't give up on Paul for he became God's missionary to the Gentiles. God didn't give up on Jonah either for he preached the shortest sermon ever recorded, a mere eight words, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" and the great city, including the king and his nobles, repented of their evil ways. This is incredibly good news, especially if we are feeling some distance from God, for God will not give up on us, not on you or me or this church. God will continue to call us to respond in obedience.

Now back to the story. Did you notice what God said to Jonah? God said, "Get up! Go! And proclaim the message that I tell you!" Get up and go. Don't worry about what you are to say. Don't worry about the reaction of the great city. Just get up and go and trust that I will provide what you need.

How often do we hear God say to us, "Get up and go." But, then we are filled with excuses. We don't trust that God will make the work before us possible. We size up our own abilities, our own resources, and quickly say it can't be done. Friends, more often than not we make God very small. We downsize God and make God in our own limited

image, rather than realizing that we are made in the image of “the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land,” the God who makes all things possible!

Jonah, though, got up and went this time. Even so, there is an element of suspense that we might all miss given our familiarity with this story. Although, Jonah got up and went, we don’t know his intentions. Is he still harboring animosity against the Ninevehites? Does he plan to wait for God’s instructions or will he strike out on his own?

If we are paying close attention to the story, as soon as Jonah gets up and goes, the storyteller immediately shifts the focus from Jonah to the great city. Nineveh is an exceedingly large city, a three day walk across says the storyteller. If we pick up a fact shared in the fourth chapter, we would know that the city has more than 120,000 citizens. Numerically, just under double the size of our city. But distance wise, the city covered a very large geographic area...a three days walk!

Why the focus on the size? Our translation misses the nuance of the Hebrew text. The city is “great to God” in Hebrew. Even though Nineveh has turned from God, God remains sovereign. Nineveh is great because of God and the God calling Jonah to get up and go, is the God of this great city. Nineveh has just forgotten this truth and Jonah is summoned by God to help them remember.

What happens next is Jonah’s incredibly short sermon. The text doesn’t note that he waited for God to give him the words though, for there is no standard introduction such as, “the word of the Lord,” “thus says the Lord,” or “oracle of the Lord,” that would suggest that. Instead, Jonah just blurts out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

We are not told why, but the people of Nineveh...believed God; proclaiming a fast and dressing in sackcloth. The people started a revolution of repentance and when the news reached the king of Nineveh he followed suit. He even made a decree, “No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything, nor drink water. All shall be covered in sackcloth. All shall turn from their evil ways... for who knows, God may relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish!”

Jonah received a second chance and now the citizens of Nineveh have received a second chance. We too receive a second chance with the dawn of each and every new day. As the author of Lamentation reminds us, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies are new every morning.”

Our chapter ends with the storyteller saying, “God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon Nineveh; and he did not do it.” Nineveh’s repentance moved God. Nineveh was given a second chance.

What about you? What about us? What second chance do we need? You see, I don’t know what you need to turn from. I don’t know what God is calling you to do. I only know that God is a God of patient persistence offering second chances to individuals and to communities of faith with every new morning.

I think about all of us together as the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands, I sense God’s patient persistence with us. At this juncture in our history, we have a second chance as a church to dream dreams.

Just months ago hosting the Redlands Symphony 2017 Summer Music Academy seemed like a dream. Yet, it gave us the inspiration to clean house and give our classrooms a new look. It took hard work and lots of volunteer hours and some financial investment. Yet, I can tell you it has already been a blessing, as I had the privilege of

listening to 46 students enjoy the challenge of learning new skills on their respective musical instruments. The staff and the students have commented how wonderful our facility is and what potential it has to serve others in our community.

As we heed God's call to get up and go, how might we give our buildings a second chance to bless this community? What need could be met in this great city by repurposing these buildings that we have been entrusted with? Could this sanctuary become a concert hall or a meeting space as well as a worship space? Could our classrooms house a ministry Monday through Friday that meets a need in our city? How could our vacant dirt lot be a place of inspiration to others? How could we develop all the square footage underneath us to bless this city and our ministry?

At this juncture in history, God is saying to us through this chapter of Jonah, "I'm giving you a second chance FPC Redlands, get up and go, share my good news with the citizens of the City of Redlands, share this beautiful facility with others. Sure it's difficult work, I know Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh! I know it will be hard and is going to take some work, some financial investment, even some partnering with other organizations, but I am a great God! Remember, I am the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land..."

Let's not downsize God to our capabilities or resources or any other limitation we might suggest. Through Jonah's very curt eight words, God was able to reclaim the whole city Nineveh!

I wonder what God will be able to reclaim through us! Let's dream dreams and then act, trusting in God to do more than we can ask or imagine! Amen.