

**Lent 2010: Jonah**  
**Sermon 5 – The U-Turn Of Faith**  
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**Based on Jonah 3**

Has this ever happened to you? You're driving along in your car and someone tells you that you need to take the next right. "OK," you say, but you just keep right on talking. Then at the intersection, you end up taking a left instead of a right. Does that sound familiar? You can apologize all you want for turning in the wrong direction, but that's not going to get you any closer to where you need to be. In order to get where you need to go, you have to make a U-turn so that you can start heading back in the right direction.

That U-turn, that turning around so that you can once again head in the right direction, that's how the Bible speaks of repentance. God, through the Holy Scriptures, has revealed to us what direction our lives are to take. The Holy Bible is our roadmap for life. But as we live our lives, we sometimes make a wrong turn.

The Bible calls that wrong turn "sin." Sin is anything that we think, do, or say that goes against the directions God has given to us. And we can apologize to God all we want for making the wrong turns in our lives, but until we actually make a U-turn and reorient our lives once again in the direction of God, then we will not experience the incredible gifts of forgiveness and salvation that God desires to give to all of his children.

Last week in the story of Jonah, we heard how Jonah finally chose to make a U-turn in his life after disobeying God's command to go to the city of Nineveh. Jonah finally came to his senses, you might say. Jonah came to the realization that to live life by his own set of rules is really not living at all. Only when Jonah chose to accept God's will for his life did Jonah experience the satisfaction of being a powerful instrument in spreading the kingdom of God.

But even after Jonah finally decides to go to Nineveh, I'm sure he was still a little hesitant about entering the city and declaring God's judgment upon them. The people of Nineveh were powerful, arrogant, violent people. Jonah was just this little guy from a no-nothing nation. Jonah couldn't begin to imagine all of the things the Ninevites would do to him for speaking out against the empire.

But notice, the Ninevites actually take Jonah's words to heart. They see the error of their ways, and they, too, make a U-turn and reorient their lives toward God. I wonder... what was it that Jonah said that finally made the Ninevites come to their senses? I can guess.

Picture it: there Jonah stands reeking of fish, his clothes half-digested, dried-up kelp hanging from his ear. If I were Jonah, I know what I would say to make them change their ways: "Repent, or God will do to you what he did to me!"

No matter what Jonah actually said, the people of Nineveh hear Jonah's message from God and they believe it. They recognize the evilness of their deeds and they repent. They put on sack cloths, an ancient ritual where one mourns the mistakes of one's life and also commits to live life differently. You might say the Ninevites embarked on their own Lenten journey – a journey of confession and prayer that led them closer to God.

And notice: it wasn't just a matter of them saying, "God, I'm sorry." It was a complete U-turn, a radical change of behavior, of reorienting their lives toward God. In verse 8 of Chapter 3 of Jonah, the king doesn't just call the people to confess their sins. No, the king calls for a change in people's *behavior*. "Let us turn from our evil ways and stop all of our violence," he says.

God calls *us* to make that same kind of radical change in our lives – to not just say, "I'm sorry, God," or "I'll try harder next time," but to make a noticeable change in the way we live our lives. The season of Lent assists us in focusing on the cross, and on the gifts of forgiveness and salvation that God offered us upon that cross through the death of his Son, Jesus. Realizing that God stopped at nothing to prove his love for us, it should inspire us to change the way we live our lives.

Instead of just living for ourselves, we should commit to honor God through our thoughts, words, and deeds. Instead of taking the easy way out, we should claim the ways of God, no matter how difficult or costly they might be. Since God was willing to sacrifice it all, we, too, should be willing to give our whole lives for the sake of God's kingdom.

The Bible says, "When God saw what the Ninevites had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, God changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened."

Do you realize that God will do the same for us when he looks at the cross? As God sees Christ's body broken and blood shed upon the cross, God will change his mind on how he will deal with our sin and rebellion. God will choose not to carry out the judgment that we deserve. God will choose mercy over justice, life over death. By God placing our sin upon Jesus, our guilty verdict will be changed to an innocent one – all because of the sacrificial death of Jesus upon the cross.

It's called grace. It's called new life. It's called hope. It's called salvation. Whatever you call it, call it yours, because through the waters of Holy Baptism, God has promised to give you all of these marvelous gifts.

I recently heard a wonderful story about when Thomas Edison was still in the early stages of developing his incandescent light bulb. It took hundreds of hours to manufacture a single bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, Edison handed it to a young errand boy and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As the boy turned and started up the stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered into hundreds of pieces.

Instead of reprimanding the boy as you might expect, Edison just turned to his staff and told them to start working on another bulb. When it was completed several days later, Edison demonstrated forgiveness in the most powerful way possible. He walked over to the same boy, handed him the bulb, and said, "Please take this up to the testing room."

That is the kind of forgiveness God has shown to us. Through the cross, God has offered us a second chance, even when we have messed up royally. When God forgives our past, it is gone; it no longer defines us. By God forgiving our past, it allows us to focus fully on the present, to see how God is leading us at this moment to serve him and our neighbor.

Another prophet, Joshua, asks this of the people: "Choose this day who you will serve." Notice the language. Choose *this day*. In God's eyes, our past no longer defines us. In God's way of thinking, the future is not of our concern. Instead, God calls us to focus solely upon *this day*, to discern how God is calling us to faithfully live out God's commands in *this moment*.

The cross is our assurance that our past is forgiven and that our future is full of promise. So what are you waiting for? Make that U-turn, return to the Lord your God and you will see your heavenly Father smiling, waiting to embrace you once again in his arms of forgiving love.

Thanks be to God!