

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 O.T. 811 (NRSV)

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

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¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 O.T. Page 811
“Unexpected Outcomes”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Almighty God, we are humbled to be allowed to be in your presence and live. We ask, **“Who are we that you are mindful of us,”** and you answer, **“You are my children.”** We are comforted to be by your side. Now may our hearts be opened by the power of your Spirit to hear your Word of life today. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2a, NRSV). That ancient piece of wisdom acknowledges our human limitations. The timing of life and death is not ours to control. During my time in ministry, I have officiated at exactly 147 funerals. **The oldest of those** was for a dear old woman named Charlotte Coe. **The span** between Charlotte’ time to be born to her time to die was **104 years**. Five score and four. **And the youngest** was for a tiny little fellow named Zakary Rutter. The span between Zakary’s time to be born to his time to die **wasn’t measured in years**. The span wasn’t measured in days. The span wasn’t even measured in hours. The time appointed for Zakary was actually **no time at all**, little Zakary was still born.

Why LORD? Why do your appointed times seem so arbitrary to us? If it were up to us, we would distribute the time for living more equitably. **We would become** the Robin Hood of time. We would take from those who are rich in time and give to those who are poor. **But the timing** of life isn’t within our control. So all we can do is **sit on the ground** with Job and say, **“The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away, blessed be the name of the LORD”** (Job 1:21, NRSV).

PAUSE

Move I.

Sometimes we put our own desires ahead of God's. God tells us to do one thing and we do just the opposite. We think God can't see our point-of-view. We think God's too straight laced. Or we think God's out of touch with our modern way of life. Whatever it is that we think, **we think we know better** than God.

Our Bible lesson today is one of the great stories of the Old Testament. It's the story of "***Jonah and the Whale.***" Or at least that's what we all learned to call the story in Sunday school. But in reality, there's never any mention of a whale in Jonah's story, **in fact whales** are never mentioned in the Bible at all. What the Bible actually says is found in **Jonah 1:17 (NRSV)** where we read, "**But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.**" Somehow in our popular imagination the great fish has been morphed into a whale and the whale's status has been elevated to receiving equal billing with Jonah in the story's marquee. Sadly, this has distracted from the fundamental lesson of the story which should more properly be called "***Jonah and the People of Nineveh.***" Rather than being just another exaggerated fish story, the book of Jonah is really the story of a reluctant prophet and a wayward people. **Jonah thinks he knows better than God** when it comes to what he should do and how God should treat the people of Nineveh. Jonah's constantly putting his own desires ahead of God's.

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Sometimes we do the same thing. **We put our desires** ahead of God's too. **God tells** us it's best to save our sexuality for marriage, but we decided it's better to go for a test drive before deciding to tie the knot. **God tells us** that we should worship and stay in close fellowship with other believers and we figure we can worship God in our own way and at our own time. **We'd prefer** to sleep late, **or sign the kids up** for soccer or hockey, **or watch sports** on TV rather than going to worship. **God tells us** to render up to Creaser that which is Creaser's and unto God that which is God's. And yet we prefer to cheat on our taxes and short change God on our tithe. **Do you really think** God is going to sit back and allow us to keep running in the opposite direction? **Surely there must be consequences** for deliberately disobeying God, be they in this lifetime, or in the next.

As for Jonah, he had no problem with God destroying the people of Nineveh—after all they deserved it. Why should he go there and risk life and limb to deliver God's message to a people he despised. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, **and Jonah ran** in the opposite direction towards Tarshish. Are you running in the opposite direction from God too? Do you think you know better than God what's best for you? **Sometimes we really do put our own desires ahead of God's.**

End I.

Move II.

But resisting God only makes life more miserable. When what we want is at odds with what God wants, you can be sure going our own way will lead to a dead end. If you choose to run from God sooner or later **you're going to end up** in the belly of a great fish. It smells, its dark, and the gastric juices are literally eating you alive. About the only thing I can think of that would be more miserable than being in the belly of a great fish, **would be lying rotting** in the grave eternally cut off from God. There is a pathway that leads to death and destruction and the banner over the starting line of that pathway is "**My Way.**" The further you run from God's way, the higher your misery index will be.

The term "Misery Index" was coined by economist, **Melvin Okum**, in the 1960's. The Misery Index is the unemployment rate plus the inflation rate.¹ The idea is that there are social consequences to high levels of either of these two rates. When lots of people are out of work there's a lot of misery, and when prices are climbing faster than wages there's lots of misery too. So, a high unemployment rate coupled with a high inflation rate is a recipe for a supersized bout of misery. **That's what happened** in June of 1980 when the Misery Index reached an **all-time high of 22%**. The all-time low for the Misery Index was in **July of 1953** when **the Index stood at 3%**. **Today the Misery Index is 8.1%**. But of course, if you're one of those people without a job, **your personal Misery Index is 100%**. Or if you're **one of those people** on fixed incomes who can't afford to heat your house this winter, your personal Misery Index is 100% too.

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¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misery_index_\(economics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misery_index_(economics))

I wander if there isn't also a Spiritual Misery Index. **I think that like with Jonah**, there is a state of misery caused by ignoring God and running in the other direction. **When people focus** more on themselves more than on others, I suspect that **their Spiritual Misery Index** goes up. **When people** worry about how much money they can keep, rather than about how much they can give to God, I suspect that **their Spiritual Misery Index** goes up as well. **And when people** are more interested in justice than they are in mercy, I suspect that **their Spiritual Misery Index** goes up too. **People have** personal Spiritual Misery Indices, **and churches have** local congregation Spiritual Misery Indices, **and countries have** national Spiritual Misery Indices too. The further we stray from God, the high the Index is bound to climb.

How high is your personal Spiritual Misery Index? If it's higher than you think you can bear, you need to learn a lesson from the story of Jonah. If your Spiritual Misery Index is high, ask yourself these four questions:

- 1. What is** God asking me to do that I'm refusing to do?
- 2. Where has** God told me to go that I've chosen to head in the opposite direction?
- 3. Who has** God asked me to talk with whom I'm ignoring?
- 4. Where's** God seeking to show mercy that I'm hell bent on seeking justice?

As you ask these questions and seek God's leading, **you'll find** your Spiritual Misery Index going down. Following God is the pathway to peace. **But resisting God does make life more miserable.**

End II.

Move III.

So, obeying God isn't optional. Freewill is real, but it matters what you do with it. **When you use your freewill** to flee toward Tarshish, **you're going to find** nothing but misery. **But when you use** your freewill to conform to the will of God, **you're going to find** that there's life abundant and free. The basic question we all face is **"who is lord of our life?"** To those of us who have been in the church our whole lives, that seems like a pretty simple question. But we need to remember that outside of Christian circles, **the word lord** has fallen out of use. What does the word "lord" mean? **The Greek word** that's typically translated as lord is kurios (κύριος) which means **"master"** or **"owner."** It times past, **a peasant would address the king** as **"my lord"** or a slave would address his master as **"my lord."** So the word "lord" meant someone who ruled over your life.

How many of you remember doubling Thomas? We call Thomas a doubter because he said that he would only believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead **if he could see and touch** the nail prints in Jesus' hands and the wound in Jesus' side. For Thomas seeing would be believing. But in John's gospel we learn that Thomas didn't actually have to touch Jesus to believe, but he did need to see. **In John 20:26-28 (NIV) we read, "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"** When Thomas said, "my Lord," he was giving over the direction of his life to Jesus. Eugene Peterson has translated the Bible using more contemporary language and quotes Thomas as saying **"My Master! My God!"** Is Jesus your master? Are you more interested in doing what Jesus wants than in what you want? If you are, then you too can call Jesus **"Master!"** or **"Lord!"**

Who's in control of your life? **Are you** controlled by your ego? **Are you** controlled by the love of money? **Are you** control by an overbearing spouse? **Are you** controlled by an addiction to tobacco, or alcohol, or drugs? **Are you** controlled by an obsession with back & gold or orange & brown? If you're controlled by any of these things, you haven't yet let Jesus become the Lord of your life. **You're Spiritual Misery Index** is still rising.

Although we live in a country where 85% of the people identify themselves as Christians,² I don't think nearly that many people see Jesus as being the Master of their life. **If you went up to the typical person on the street** and asked them, **"Who is the master of your life?"** how do you think they would answer? I strongly suspect that most everyone would quickly get an incredulous look on their face as they answered, **"why I am of course!"** So long as you think and act like you're the master of your life, **you're still doing what Jonah did**. You're still running in the opposite direction. As the old John Sammis hymn says, ***"Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."*** What about **"no other way"** don't you understand? All other ways will only **increase your Spiritual Misery Index**. **So, obeying God really isn't optional.**

End III.

² <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=2>

Move IV.

And when people repent, God relents. All of the hell fire and brimstone in the Bible can be avoided if people will only repent. The God who dispenses judgment and punishment is also the God who shows grace and compassion. The God of the Old Testament has a softer side, **and the key to seeing it**, is to repent.

Many of us here today have heard to story of Jonah so many times that it has long since lost its shock value. But if you knew nothing about the story of Jonah and were reading the book for first time, what would you be expecting when God asked Jonah for a second time to go to Nineveh and deliver God's message? Well, you'd expect Jonah to obey this time and you'd expect to see the people of Nineveh get zapped. After all they have it coming. They have been persecuting the people of Israel for many years. The message that Jonah delivered is exactly five words in Hebrew. **In Jonah 3:4b (NRSV) Jonah says, "Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overthrown."** That's the entire extent of Jonah's prophetic utterance. That may have been the shortest sermon ever preached. Jonah has pronounced the LORD's condemnation on Nineveh and **he high tales it outside the city** to sit on an eastern hillside and wait for the pyrotechnics to start.

What happens next isn't what anyone is expecting. **The people of Nineveh repent!** They put on sack cloth and ashes to display their true remorse for their wickedness. That's why I titled today's sermon "*Unexpected Outcomes.*" Everyone was expecting God's wrath to pour down upon Nineveh, but since the people repented God relented. **In Jonah 3:10 (NIV) we read "When God saw what [the people of Nineveh] did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."** The expected destruction didn't come to pass. We have a totally unexpected outcome.

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The translators of the NIV have softened the meaning of the Hebrew here. The NIV translators imply that God was only “threatening” destruction on Nineveh. But the Hebrew leaves little doubt that God actually intended to destroy Nineveh but changed his mind when he saw how the people reacted to his judgment. **God’s more interested** in mercy than he is in justice. God would far rather save sinners than destroy them. **That’s what grace is**, receiving mercy when you really deserve punishment. Yet many criticize the **Old Testament** claiming they see a God who is long on judgment and short on compassion. But seven times in the Old Testament including in here **Jonah 4:2 (NRSV)** the Bible says that the LORD is “**slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**” That’s the God we see in the story of “*Jonah and the People of Nineveh.*” God’s interested in how people react to God’s Word. God shows grace and mercy. **Yes, when people repent God does relent.**

End IV.

Conclusion: There is a time to be born and a time to die. We might want to be the Robin Hood of time, but we don't control time. **Sometimes we put our own desires ahead of God's.** Like Jonah we run for Tarshish when God said to go to Nineveh. **But resisting God only makes life more miserable.** When our Spiritual Misery Index is rising off the scale we need to stop and ask, "*What's God asking me to do that I'm refusing to do?*" **So, obeying God isn't optional.** We do need to trust and obey, for there really is no other way. **And then when people repent, God relents.** God didn't destroy Nineveh and that was an "*Unexpected Outcome.*" The LORD really is "*slow to anger and abounding in love.*" If you'll only make Jesus the "**Master of your life**" you'll get to see the softer side of God too.

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Oh God, we're thankful that you are a God of compassion. As you had compassion on the people of Nineveh, you have compassion on us too. You give us so much more than we deserve. You really are a God of "*Unexpected Outcomes.*" **Amen!**

10:30 "I Surrender All" Red Hymnal No. 354

Verses 1, 3, & 5.

Sending Forth: Have you be running away from God? Are you thirsty for vengeance? Repent! Forgive so that you may be forgiven. Go forth and let Jesus be the Master of your life as we serve as instruments of God's unexpected love. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**