

“Cities and the God of Grace” - Jonah Part 9

Jonah 4:5-11

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on November 19, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Since 1830 the world’s population has exploded from 1 billion people to 7 billion people. As the population has grown people have flooded into cities.
 - The *Population Reference Bureau* states that, ***“In 1800, only 3 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas. By 1900, almost 14 percent were urbanites...In 1950, 30 percent of the world's population resided in urban centers... In 2008, for the first time, the world's population was evenly split between urban and rural areas...It is expected that 70 percent of the world population will be urban by 2050.”***¹
 - *Statistic Canada* says that Victoria is growing at a faster rate than the national average: in 2016 we grew 6.7% while the national average was 5.6%.
- In light of these facts, you would think that Christians would be pouring into cities, developing new urban ministries, and strategically working to plant thousands of churches to tell people of Jesus. Sadly this is not the case. Christians are often *indifferent* or downright *hostile* to the city.
 - Indifferent in that comparatively little effort and money is given to Christian work in the city despite it being where most people live.
 - Hostile in that Christians tend to avoid the city because they see it as a dark place that is harmful and corrupting toward Christian faith and living.
- It is precisely this attitude that the book of Jonah confronts. This story is about how God wants to pour out his grace and love on the corrupt city of Nineveh. The book of Jonah all comes down to this last question in verse 11 where God says, **READ 11 – *should not I pity Nineveh, that great city?***
 - But Jonah does not share God’s heart for the city. Jonah is a morally upright, religiously conservative, city disdaining, city phobic, man who just wants to see Nineveh and all its godlessness burn to the ground.
- This whole story then has been about God changing Jonah’s attitude and heart toward this wicked city. In these last six verses God seeks one final time to change Jonah’s attitude and to change our attitudes toward the city. In these verses we see three ways we should relate to our great city of Victoria.
 - First, we are to go to the city. Second, we are to engage the city. Third, we are to love the city.

GO TO THE CITY

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First then, as Christians we are called to go to the city.
 - Two times God has called Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh. He eventually goes but now in chapter 4 Jonah storms out of the city.
 - God is trying to give him a heart to go back in.
- In the Bible, the call to urban missions begins with Jonah. And after Jonah it seems to be a key strategy in reaching people for Christ. It is not that rural people in Ladysmith and Saltspring do not need Jesus. It’s just that strategically speaking everything starts in the city and moves out to the rural areas.
 - People are moving to Victoria – people from all different nations are making this their home.

¹ <http://www.prb.org/Educators/TeachersGuides/HumanPopulation/Urbanization.aspx>

- For one of my doctoral classes I had to read a book about urban ministry entitled *Center Church*. I'll use many thoughts from it today. The book likens cities to a giant heart. The city pulls people in, keeps them for a short time, and then pumps them out to the four corners, or the four limbs of the world. So if we want to reach the world we must reach our city.
- Clearly the New Testament church believed this. Even a cursory reading of the book of Acts reveals how urban centred it is. In Acts 17 Paul goes to Athens, which was really the intellectual centre of the ancient world. In Acts 18 he goes to Corinth, which was one of the commercial centers of the Roman Empire. In Acts 19 Paul goes to Ephesus, which was the spiritual and religious center of the empire with all its temples. Paul eventually gets to Rome, which was of course the military and political centre of the ancient world.
 - This strategy worked. By 350 AD 50% of the Roman Empire was Christian. The vast majority were urban people. In fact, this is where we get our word "pagan." It simply means "country dweller." Since most people in the city were Christians, to be called a pagan assumed you must be a non-Christian from the countryside.
 - So the logic is simple. Cities are filled with people. Cities are the fountainhead of culture. Therefore, Christians must go to the city.
- But generally speaking, Christians today approach cities like Jonah. In verse 5 Jonah shows us three wrong approaches to the city.

LEAVING THE CITY

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Wrong approach #1: leaving the city. **READ 5a** – *Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city.*
 - Went out? One of the greatest revival in history just happened and Jonah left? Shouldn't he be having new believers classes, training new pastors, setting up a Bible college, and planning a mission trip to Cairo?
 - But no, Jonah flees the city. Even if God is at work, Jonah is so offended by its godlessness that he leaves.
- So many Christians think of the city this way. I recall a Christian we know very well visiting Vancouver. There is a street called Davie Street, which is well known for its party lifestyle and celebration of homosexuality. After walking down Davie Street she expressed with great disgust and how dark and terrible Vancouver is. She even argued that it might be OK for Christians to live in the city but it is not right to raise kids here.
 - But listen, the Great Commission does not say to ***"go and make disciples of all nations, unless that means you have to go into a city."***
- The message of the gospel is that, despite our rebellion, God did not abandon this planet to set up a little commune on Mars. Rather He sent His Son into the world. Jesus, the holy one, entered into the darkness in order to bring light.
 - We must not flee the city. We must go to the city.

ISOLATING FROM THE CITY

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Wrong approach #2: isolating from the city. **READ 5b** – *and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.*
 - Was there really no place in the entire city of Nineveh for him to stay?
 - Jonah did not simply flee the city. He built a shelter within view of the city. So he was part of the city but not part of it.

- We may laugh at Jonah but do we not build our own shelters? Think about it. It is very possible for a Christian to be born, live, and die with little interaction in the city. We build Christian daycares, Christian schools, home-schools, Christian camps for kids, Christian universities, Christian clubs on campus, Christian retirement homes, and even Christian cemeteries.
 - Do not mistake me. I am not saying these things are wrong. They have their place. What I am saying is if do these things because we are trying to live in the city but to still avoid it, then we have missed the whole point of our calling.
- Jesus, the Holy One, did not set up a space station just outside of earth. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. He did not set up a commune outside of culture in order to call people out. Rather, Jesus went into the towns and cities. He ate and sat with those who were considered morally corrupt people.
 - We must not isolate from the city. We must go to the city.

BECOMING A SPECTATOR

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** Wrong approach #3: becoming a spectator of the city. **READ 5b – *and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.***
 - He sat down. He relaxed. He watched. Rather than involving himself in Nineveh, Jonah became a spectator, watching to see if God would nuke it.
 - He was spectator not a participant. We are to go to the city. To be involved in it.
- We are committed to the entire CRD. To being a part of it. To joining soccer leagues with our kids, to ministering on street teams, to serving our neighbours, to joining the PAC at school, to caring for those in the assisted living homes.
 - Wherever God calls you let us never flee the city, isolate from the city, or be a spectator of the city. Let us go to the city.

ENGAGE THE CITY

- Here is the second way we must approach Victoria. **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** We must engage the city.
 - Before we look at this whole thing with the vine I want you to notice how God approaches the culture of the city. On the one hand God seems to be against culture. Jonah is to preach against the wickedness of the city. God is angry with their wickedness.
- But then notice in verse 11 why God says he sent Jonah to Nineveh **READ 11 – *And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?***
 - Three times God has called the city “great.” That means great in number but it also means important. Despite his anger at their wickedness God cares about this city.
- And why bring up that statement about the cattle? As modern urban people we don’t really get it. Is this saying God loves animals? Well yes, but much more.
 - When I was 18 I spent two months in rural Kenya. I will never forget being asked a strange question: how many cattle does your father own? When I told them he did not own any cows they were shocked. You can probably guess why. Since I am Caucasian and from the West they assumed I was wealthy. Since cattle are indicator of wealth, the question was meant to discern how wealthy my family is.
 - You see in ancient times you didn’t have stocks; you had livestock. You diversified your portfolio by adding goats and chickens to your cattle. Cattle were at the center of the economy. Not only did they produce milk and meat but they were traded, bought, and sold.

- So we see that God is not just concerned for the souls of the people. He is also concerned for the well being of the city. God is concerned for the animals, for the economy, for the food production, and for the socio-economic prosperity of this important city. He cares about social issues.
- This helps us to understand how we should relate to urban culture. On the one hand we see that we are to live a countercultural lifestyle in comparison to the city. As the people of God we are citizens of the city of God. Revelation 22 tells us that one day that city will come down from heaven and overtake the earth. The gates of that future city will be closed to all wickedness. Because we are citizens of the city of God we find that our values often conflict with the cities of humanity. In this we are to show the city of Victoria an alternate way to live. The way we use sex, money, and power must reflect the city of God.
 - Most conservative Christians agree entirely with this. The problem is following from this is usually an attitude that despises the city, that flees the city, or that simply isolates from the city. But we see here that living differently does not mean escaping the city. God does name wickedness for what it is but he does not then abandon Nineveh. Rather, he pursues it. He engages with Nineveh. He sends Jonah. He shows mercy. And he says that he does this because he has concern for this great city.
 - So also, we are to engage the city.
- The best example of what this looks like occurred two centuries after the book of Jonah. The people of God had been conquered by the new world superpower and carried off to the world-class city of Babylon. In the Bible, Babylon is so corrupt that it becomes a shorthand word for humanity in rebellion against God.
 - As the people of God arrived in Babylon they responded the same as Jonah and most religiously conservative people. They camped outside the city in order to stay pure. But this is not what God wants. In Jeremiah 29 God has his prophet write a letter to his people. We read that God wants them to move in and engage the city.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7) “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”**
 - So while living in this corrupt city the people of God are not supposed to build communes and isolate themselves. They are to engage the city. They are to use their resources for the common good. Even though the values of Babylon totally contradict God, the people of God are to be the very best citizens of the city. They are not to despise the city or flee the city. They are to engage it, bless it, and seek its good.
- So it is not enough to just go to the city. We must engage the city. This means speaking the message of the gospel but it also means seeking the prosperity of the city. We must be concerned for it. This means we must be participants in it, not spectators of it.
 - Is this not the way of Jesus? When he came to earth he did not live in a commune to protect his holiness. He engaged with people. He sought the good of people by healing, teaching, caring, blessing their children, going to their weddings, and providing for the poor.
 - This is the kind of church we want Central to be – a church that is *in* the city and *for* the city.
- How can you engage our city? There are a million ways but let me just speak about this upcoming month of December.

- On the first Sunday of December we will begin raising \$34k to bring our Eritrean refugee family to Victoria.
- On Dec 16th we are partnering with Extreme Outreach to serve Christmas dinner. Volunteer and be there.
- On Dec 21st we are partnering with the George Jay gift emporium.
- On Christmas Eve we are putting a lot of work into an evening service designed for the community of Victoria. Bring your friends to hear the gospel.
- And then as we come to the year-end please think about how you can make a larger year-end financial gift to the church. We have set out many goals and dream about engaging the city even more but that requires funds.

LOVE THE CITY

- Go to the city. Engage the city. Finally we see in this passage that we are to **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** love the city. The two previous points were more action oriented. In this point I am talking about our attitude toward the city. I am using love in the heart attitude sense. How do get this attitude that does not look down on or despise the city but loves it and seeks its good?
 - This really is the main point of this last section. God is trying to develop a new heart in Jonah toward the city. Let's see how he does this we might also gain God's heart for the city.
- **READ 6** – *“Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.”*
 - Despite Jonah's city disdaining attitude, the God of grace seeks to ease Jonah's discomfort. Oh how patient God is with his people. In chapter 1 God “appointed” a great fish to save Jonah from drowning and now he “appointed” a vine to save him heatstroke. The vine is likely a castor oil plant or a gourd, both of which are fast growing and leafy plants.
 - For the very first time in the book Jonah is happy. How ironic. He is not happy when God shows grace to Nineveh but he is happy about not getting sunburn.
- **READ 7-8** – *“But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”*
 - Once again we God's sovereign power at work. He appointed the fish, appointed the vine, and now he appoints the worm and the wind. Unlike Jonah, all of creation obeys the voice of its Creator. This scorching wind comes down out of the mountains of Iran reaching speeds of 90km/hr.
 - Jonah is so uncomfortable that again he would rather die than live.
- God then asks Jonah a question. **READ 9a** – *“But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?”* God loves to ask questions. To Adam and Eve he said, *“Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”* After Cain murdered his brother God asked him, *“Where is your brother Abel?”* Jesus asked Judas, *“Are you betraying the Son of man with a kiss?”*
 - Is God asking this question because he does not know the answer? No. Like any good counselor God asks questions to expose our inner selves – to help us look inward and see the issues we are hiding. But rather than examine his anger, Jonah justifies himself. **READ 9b** – *“And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”*

- As the great counselor, God now asks one final question that is meant to show Jonah the wrong attitude of his heart. The question is at the end of verse 11 but God sets it up in verse 10.
- **READ 10-11** – *And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”*
 - The point is simple. God is saying, *“If you feel concern about the destruction of a vine you did not create, shouldn’t I be concerned about the destruction of people and animals I did create?”*
 - God is saying, *“Jonah, on the death scale, what is worse? The death of a plant or the death of 120,000 human beings? Jonah, how is it that you love a plant more than you love people?”*
- That these people did not know their right hand from their left means that they were spiritually ignorant. It does not mean they were innocent because in chapter 3 they admitted their guilt. It means they are trapped in sin and can’t get out.
 - Cities are filled with people who, because of their sin, are lost. But this book is calling us to have God’s heart for such people – a heart of grace and concern.
- I remember being in China with Heather and Emily a few years ago. We were visiting a 1200-year old Buddhist temple. Emily listened as our guide explained the 500 incarnations of the Buddha. She watched as people bowed before 20-foot tall golden statues. She smelled the incense people offered in worship to Buddha.
 - I asked her what she was thinking. For an 8 year old I was amazed by her response. She basically quoted Isaiah 44. She said, *“Why would anyone want to bow to a statue? Statues aren’t alive and they are so ugly. Why would you worship this when you could worship the living God?”*
 - I said, *“Emily you are so right to see the foolishness of idol worship. We must also have a heart of compassion for these people. They don’t know of the living God. They are trapped in this. We need to pray for them.”*
- Do you have God’s heart of compassion for our city? Like Jonah many of us seem more concerned for the shade of our own comfort, than for a city that is under the judgement of God. Oh may we have God’s heart for Victoria.
 - When God says he has compassion on Nineveh the word literally means to have tears in one’s eyes. This is the heart of God for Victoria. We read that when Jesus *“approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.”* Elsewhere we read, *“When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*
 - This love is not a mere feeling. God did not just have loving feelings toward Nineveh. He acted. He pursued their good. Likewise, God did not just have loving feelings toward our rebellious planet. He acted. He sent His Son. Were you not once among those who were lost? Did God not seek you out despite your sin? Did he not send His Son to die for you that you might one day walk the streets of gold in the city of the New Jerusalem? Has he not shown such tremendous compassion toward you? Then let this compassion fill your heart for our city.
- Let us not be spectators of the city. Let us engage. Let us speak of Jesus as we have opportunity and seeking the common good of this great city of Victoria.
 - Go to the city. Engage the city. Love the city.