

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 21, 2018

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

FOR REFLECTION

**“The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.”**

~ J.R.R. TOLKIEN, THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

Three Day’s Walk

The Book of Jonah is satire – written during or after the Babylonian Exile in sixth or fifth century b.c.e. Jews had been driven out of their homeland and were living as minority groups in neighboring populations. There was huge concern with maintaining traditional covenant values and identity as G-d’s holy people – over against the melting pot of the Persian Empire. Many leaders conclude that separation of the Jewish community from the outside world – as much as possible – was the only recourse.

There was also a concern over G-d’s unfair treatment of the Jews. Biblical traditions explained that the exile was G-d’s punishment for the Jews’ neglect of the covenant laws. But as they lived among foreigners they realized that the ethical norms and behavior of other peoples were more abhorrent than their own. If Jews deserved punishment, how could G-d possibly spare others whose offenses were far more serious?

Harper Collins Study Bible NRSV pp.1374-5

There was a deep sense of G-d’s unfairness that led to the story of the accidentally highly successful prophet, Jonah. As you may remember, in chapter 1, Jonah is called and says, “No way.” He flees on a ship, G-d sends a storm, the sailors try to save the ship and Jonah, finally toss Jonah overboard, and are all converted to fear and worship of YHWH.

In chapter 2, Jonah hangs out inside the belly of a whale for three days and nights while he thinks about his situation. He finally prays, promises to answer the call, and is barfed out onto land.

In chapter 3, Jonah finds himself Nineveh, a large city in Assyria – the same nation that conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 b.c.e. Jonah has been sent to save a bunch of pagans and he is not happy about it. It is a huge city, three days' walk across – echoing the three days spent inside the whale.

Now how big was Nineveh, really? As a biblical measurement, the distance of one day's walk has been estimated from 32 to 40 kilometers (20–25 miles).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day%27s_journey

However, based on evidence from ancient texts and archaeological reconstructions, Nineveh was far smaller than 60 miles across – even though, for its time, the city was impressive.

A. Leo Oppenheim ranks Nineveh as the second largest city of the ancient Near East:

The largest city was undoubtedly Babylon in the Chaldean period; its area covered 2,500 acres. Then follows Nineveh, with 1,850 acres...

As there are 640 acres per square mile, according to Oppenheim's estimate, Nineveh would cover an area of around three square miles. This corresponds to the assessment of the former director of excavation at Nineveh that the circumference of the city wall was around twelve kilometers.

How Big Was Nineveh?: Literal versus Figurative Interpretation of City Size

Charles Halton, the southern baptist theological seminary

https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/bbr18b01_halton.pdf

So, in line with this being satire – and Jonah being a reluctant prophet – we find that this three days' walk was really just a mile a day – but sure felt like 20 miles a day to Jonah. And I'll be bold and say that many of us have had days like that...

So, to wrap up the story, Jonah walks a mile declaring that unless the people repent and shape up, they will be "overthrown." The Hebrew term, used here in the passive voice, means "turned around" or "transformed." Immediately, the people and the rulers of Nineveh turn to fasting and wear sackcloth. Even the animals fast and wear sackcloth – perhaps just to make sure G-d knows they got the message. It takes a mere one day of walking one mile for repentance to kick in.

And what does G-d do? He forgives them. He changes his mind about bringing calamity upon them and leaves them alone. And Jonah is furious. Why did he have to come all that way to do relatively nothing to get this result so easily? And, for G-d's sake, why doesn't G-d do that for the Jewish people? As Jonah pouts, the book ends with a question about G-d's right to be concerned about a city full of repentant people – and – animals – even if they aren't Jewish.

I love this story, I love Jonah, I love that everything ends with a question.
But, in reading the story this time, I found myself focusing on the three days' walk.
Having just gone through two weeks –
that ended with a three day walk with my brothers and sister –
through the last days of our mothers' life –
a walk that felt much longer than 3 miles and more like 60 –
I'm wondering about you – and if any of you recall such a time in your life?

When have you walked through days that felt like years?

Satire or real life, whether we are aware of it or not,
I will assert that G-d walks with us through those days that feel like years.
My mother was not alone.
We are not alone.
Our Epiphany is G-d With Us, Emmanuel.
Thank G-d.

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 21, 2018 – Epiphany 3 – Year B

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 The 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."

3 So 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. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth...10 When 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.

A Day's journey in pre-modern literature, including the Bible, ancient geographers and ethnographers such as Herodotus, is a measurement of distance.

In the Bible, it is not as precisely defined as other Biblical measurements of distance; the distance has been estimated from 32 to 40 kilometers (20–25 miles).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day%27s_journey

A figure commonly given for the length of a typical daily journey in the ancient world is 20 miles per day.⁵ When this number is combined with the translation of Jonah 3:3 as “a three days’ walk across” (nrsv), one might envision a city 60 miles in breadth. While Nineveh was certainly large, based on evidence from ancient texts and archaeological reconstructions, we can be sure that Nineveh was far smaller than this figure...

Even though it was not 60 miles across, Nineveh was by all accounts an impressive city...

In addition to its imposing architectural features, for its time, Nineveh was also extremely large. A. Leo Oppenheim ranks Nineveh as the second largest city of the ancient Near East:

The largest city was undoubtedly Babylon in the Chaldean period; its area covered 2,500 acres. Then follows Nineveh, with 1,850 acres, while Uruk [biblical Erech] was somewhat smaller, with 1,110 acres.

As there are 640 acres per square mile, according to Oppenheim’s estimate, Nineveh would cover an area of around three square miles. This corresponds to the assessment of the former director of excavation at Nineveh that the circumference of the city wall was around twelve kilometers. Additionally, a survey by the University of California at Berkeley estimated that the city covered an area of 750 hectares. At between three and four square miles, Nineveh was certainly a huge city, but archaeological evidence demonstrates that it was far smaller than 60 miles in diameter.

[How Big Was Nineveh?: Literal versus Figurative Interpretation of City Size](#)

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