Nineveh and Us: A Lenten Reflection by Archpriest Timothy Hojnicki

Whenever Great Lent comes around, the Church offers us various lessons in repentance. We hear this in the Great Canon of St. Andrew, the various hymns, the lives of the saints, and the selected Scripture from the lectionary. One of my favorite stories that I am always drawn to is the story of the Prophet Jonah. It was my favorite Old Testament story growing up and still is, even to this very day. You will remember that we read his entire story, the whole Book of Jonah during the Vesperal Liturgy of St. Basil the Great on Holy Saturday every year. We will all read it again very soon - it is the 4th Reading of the 15 Old Testament readings that are read. As a kid I would always sign up early to make sure I got to read that one and even maneuvered it so that I got to read it at seminary too. Now my oldest son reads it in Mechanicsburg! A family tradition, if you will…

I love the story of Jonah. It's one of those stories we have all heard since we were in Church School. Jonah is one of the twelve minor prophets who lived some 800+ years before Christ. According to the tradition of the Church, it was Jonah who was the son of the widow of Zarephath (or sometimes translated Sarepta) in Sidon whom the Prophet Elijah raised from the dead that we hear of in the 3rd Book of Kingdoms (or 1st Book of Kings to some.) We also read this story on Holy Saturday – the 8th Reading – a very interesting connection!

Jonah is this reluctant prophet who was told by God to go to the pagan city of Nineveh, called "that Great City" even by God Himself… and it was this city which was believed to be the capital city of the Assyrian empire at the time. God told Jonah to preach to the Ninevites about their sin, because the cry of their blatant wickedness had come up unto God. Even in secular history the Assyrian people had a kind of reputation for brutality and being a rough bunch. These are the people that Jonah is sent. Jonah finds out that if they would not repent in three days God would destroy their city and allow it to be overthrown. God wants Jonah to be His messenger and tell these people to repent. Not just so he could destroy them, but as we come to find out, because the Lord wants to spare them, and quite frankly Jonah thinks this is a crazy idea! First, why in the world would they listen to him? And second, why would they – the inhabitants of "that great city" want to change at his feeble message? After all, these people didn't even believe in the Lord God to begin with! And worse yet for Jonah's pride, if he did preach, and if God in true fashion would be merciful, then he would look foolish because God wouldn't actually do anything. You get the idea that our Jonah is a complicated guy…

Jonah comes up with this stellar plan…to hide from God. Granted hindsight is 20/20, and we have the benefit to know the rest of the story, but his plan… to hide from God… "He who is everywhere present and fills all things," was not the best game plan, but such is the story. So, we know he

attempted to get away from God by taking a ship from Joppa to Tarshish. Again, an important detail is that Tarshish is the complete opposite direction where God wants Jonah to go. Some speculate Tarshish is actually at the southern end of what we now call Spain! Nineveh is believed to be in modern Iraq, just for context, so in this plan, we know he's going the wrong way!

It is on this journey across the Mediterranean Sea that a terrible storm rose up and Jonah made it known to the other sailors that he was the cause for the tempest. He directed them to throw him overboard and if they did, the sea would calm down, and God would spare them. So, they did, and as is most noted to this account, Jonah was then swallowed by the whale, or as the Greek translation says, "a great fish." Some of the Church Fathers even say it was actually a creature created by God for this specific purpose. In any event, whatever it was, Jonah was in the belly of this monstrous creature. What is so important for us and why we read it on Holy Saturday is that Jonah was in the belly of the whale just as our Lord was in the tomb - for three days. And just as Jonah came forth from this creature, our Lord also comes forth from the tomb after three days. The parallel is a beautiful one which Christ Himself used in the 12th Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel foretelling His own Resurrection to His disciples. If you are paying attention, you'll hear this imagery chanted and sung more and more in the coming week leading up to Pascha. Even on Pascha night it is mentioned in the Canon. We will sing: "and like Jonah from the whale on the third day, Thou didst arise from the grave!" The connection with Jonah's ordeal in the belly of the whale and Christ in the tomb is so important!

So, while Jonah is trapped in the belly of the whale he prayed fervently to the Lord for deliverance, and this is a great prayer to remember when in a difficult place. Granted I doubt anyone here will ever be trapped in the belly of a whale… but we all have difficult places we find ourselves trapped in from time to time, be it work, or school, difficult relationships, building projects, or the various parish struggles we all face from time to time. Jonah prayed unto the Lord God out of the belly of the whale, and we call this the Canticle of Jonah found in the 2nd chapter of his book vs. 2-9. It says:

> *I called to the LORD, out of my distress, and He answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and Thou didst hear my voice. For Thou didst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me; all Thy waves and Thy billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am cast out from Thy presence; how shall I again look upon Thy holy temple? The waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet Thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to Thee, into Thy holy temple. Those who vanities and lies forsake their own mercy. With the voice of thanksgiving and praise. I will sacrifice to Thee. As much as I vowed, I shall offer up to Thee. Salvation is of the Lord.*

With that prayer, the Lord has the creature spit Jonah out on the shore. So, Jonah gets the idea that God isn't going to take no for an answer. He finally goes to Nineveh, "that Great City" which, by the way, at that point was still some 500 miles away! To be sure, he was not walking into a pleasant situation! For context, Assyrian records brag about their torture methods and public displays of brutality.

Yet into this hardened culture walks our reluctant prophet. For a whole day he preaches all over the city amazingly with no signs, no miracles - just a warning. Literally, an eight-word sermon: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That's it. Eight Hebrew words. Here finally, Jonah is obedient and simply says what God told him to say. A sharp message of judgment, not mercy. A warning, not an invitation. But it was the Word of the Lord—and it struck like lightning. The effectiveness wasn't in Jonah—it was in the Divine Authority behind the words warning these people of the wrath of God which was to come. They were warned that the city would be overthrown, complete destruction, fire & brimstone, the works. And he simply says: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" He then leaves, and positions himself opposite the city to get a good view. He pitches a tent and settles in to get a front row seat of the impending destruction. He believed the Lord's word, this was going to be an epic display of the Wrath of God punishing this nation of sinners.

There is an important nuance in the text. In the Hebrew, the word for "overthrown" could also be translated as "change" or "transformation." So, the warning from God carried dual potential: judgment or transformation. The Hebrew meaning can imply ruin—or dramatic change. Nineveh's repentance made it the latter. Almighty God still had the door of repentance open for them to come through it. There is an important lesson in that. And then what happens? The fire and brimstone never come. These pagan people who didn't even believe in God, these pagans who surely would not have listened to poor Jonah, these people who knew seemingly nothing of what God expected of them, these people who apparently didn't know their right hand from their left… they repented. And not just that, but the Scripture says they repented bitterly.

It is interesting to note that it wasn't a top-down decision. The Scripture tells us that the people proclaimed a fast first. Only after that did the king order that every man, woman, child and animal fast and be decked in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their sincere repentance before the Lord God. Inexplicably, much to Jonah's chagrin, God spares the city, because as it says, "God saw their works." God saw that the people took Jonah's words seriously and did something about it. The Lord saw their sincere repentance and the change in their collective lives and, as His nature, He showed mercy on the people of Ninevah. It's beautiful!

So, what's my point? Well, we all know this story, right? We might know it… but can we identify with it in our own lives? Too often we can be tempted to read the Scriptures and think it applies to "those" people. But what about us? How does this relate to us arguably 2,800 or so years later? Jonah preached repentance for one day – literally one day - and a pagan city of 120,000 (for context that would make it more than 3 times larger than the city of Harrisburg!) did a complete 180-degree change. All these people with true contrition and repentance changed their ways, from the king down to the last man, woman, and child and they were spared in one day.

So, for in 2026: How many times have we heard about repentance? How many confessions have we given? How many Great Lents have we been through? What do we have to show for it? As we enter the 6th and final week of the fast, we have heard about repentance from the Holy Scriptures: Genesis, Proverbs, Isaiah, and from the writings of the Fathers. Back during Clean Week (the first week of Great Lent) for four nights in a row we also heard about repentance in the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete (which I like to call an Aerobic Orthodox Bible Study on Repentance set to music…) and also from countless saints who composed the Stikhera verses at Vespers and at the Presanctified Liturgies that we have heard and sung. We have heard not from one, but MANY prophets, heralds, and teachers instructing us to do the same thing as the Ninevites: Repent. Change our ways. Something needs to give. Again, I ask, all these weeks later, how are we doing? As parishes… as families… as individuals …but for most of us understandably "without much cattle…" See when Jonah finally got with the program when the whale coughed him up and when he was set to go to Nineveh, God spoke to him again. We read from the 3rd chapter: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying: Arise, and go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach there according to the message I previously spoke to you." God reminds him just in case Jonah might have forgotten that the Lord wanted him to fulfill his initial instruction. Well today we, like Jonah, are given another message. In fact, if you have been attending Lenten Vespers services in our respective parishes we are given the word of the Lord time and time again that says: "repent, and trust in the Lord's mercy." The reality is we can talk about the evils of the world, and all the bad things - and there are bad things: scandal, moral and financial crises, wars, rumors of wars, pain suffering, sickness - and we can point at "those people" or "that group" or "this area" who we might feel are responsible. But like so much in the spiritual life repentance doesn't begin with "them" it begins with one person… me.

So, how are we doing as individuals entering into the 6th week of Great Lent 2026? Do we have a right attitude and direction as we work out our repentance? Are the people of Nineveh, those pagans who were completely ignorant of God, able to repent better than we? We who have been given so much to help us and encourage us more than they. Are we able to do the same? We have the Gospel. We have the sacraments, the services, we have the Church. Ultimately, we have Christ! Are we able to respond like them? Remember when we inevitably fail to follow His calling – which if we are honest, we do many times, thankfully God does not give up on us, just like He

didn't give up on Jonah or the 120,000 Ninevites…or their cattle. None the less, there was still an expectation God had for Jonah to preach His message. There was still an expectation that the people of Nineveh could repent, and in a similar manner, there is an expectation for each and everyone of us to go and do likewise.

Just like Jonah, the Lord speaks to all of us now as He did to Jonah a second, and a third time, in fact he speaks to us over and over and continually. He continually says: "Go and do according to the message I previously spoke to you." So you're asking – "What was that message?" You guessed it: Repent. We all no doubt heard this at Forgiveness Vespers weeks ago: *"Let us begin the fast with joy, let us prepare ourselves for spiritual efforts, let us abstain from every passion, as we abstain from food, let us rejoice in the spirit and persevere in love…"* We were called to change our "normal" way of living. We were called ultimately to the same message as to Ninevah: Repent… but now the Lord adds a bit more urgency: Repent… for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, indeed, it is already here! Have we, or more importantly from this point forward, will we, repent and offer fruits worthy of that repentance?

Jonah emerges from the belly of the whale ready to fulfill the instruction of the Lord, so much so that he is kind of miffed when God then spares Ninevah because of their sincere repentance. Let us, the faithful have the same resolve. We are on the down slope of the fast. In just a few days we will celebrate Holy Pascha. But before we can rejoice and enjoy that, there is much work to be done to prepare ourselves to behold the Passion of Christ our God coming very soon to an Orthodox Parish near you!

Just to put things in perspective for those Ninevites, some 600 years later – after Jonah - the lesser-known Prophet Nahum again preaches repentance to Nineveh because they returned again to their sin. This time they do not repent or change. And this time they were not spared, but were destroyed with fire and brimstone so much so that the location of this city is disputed to this very day. Ninevah didn't learn the lesson and were literally wiped off the map. Scary stuff!

Dear ones, very soon we will sing on Holy Friday night at the Matins of Holy Saturday and at the Midnight office right before our Paschal celebration, quoting the end of the canticle of Jonah: *"Jonah was caught but not held fast in the belly of the whale. He was a sign of Thee who dist suffer and give Thyself over unto burial; and he came forth from the monster as from a bridal chamber, and cried out to the guards: you that watch vainly and without avail have forsaken your salvation!"* Let us heed the words of the great Prophet Jonah, God forbid we go through this blessed wonderfully beautiful, difficult season with nothing to show for it spiritually. St. Isaac the Syrian says that this time was given to us for repentance, don't waste it in vain pursuits. If we waste our lives living only for the things of this world, and not the things of the Kingdom then in a sense we have forsaken our own salvation. We've squandered the great gift that has been given

to us in our Orthodox tradition, and like the man who hid his talent, we waste the opportunity, and sadly, we all know how that parable ended.

So let us, embrace this ancient but eternally relevant teaching of our Holy Church and finish the course of this fast with the resolve of Jonah, seeking to fulfill the will and direction of Christ our God. Not just during these 40 days which we are now closer to the end than the beginning, but right now, in our parishes, in our homes, and in our individual lives.

May our loving Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us direction, and hope, and who works wonders in ages past, and even to this present day, strengthen all of us; Clergy to catechumens, and everyone in between, to accomplish this great and essential work, a work that we like Jonah agreed to fulfill by virtue of our Baptism and Chrismation and as people who would call ourselves by His Holy name.