Sermon Series: The Reluctant Prophet
Sermon Title: A Mission's Moment

Text: Jonah 3:1-10 -- Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. 6 The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Introduction: One of the old cartoons that was rated **#20 out of the top fifty cartoons** of all time by **TV Guide in 2002** was **Popeye the Sailor Man**. All five kids in my family used to watch it. It seems that every episode was based on the same plot. Popeye would get into a confrontation with Alice the Goon, Sea Hag, Brutus, or another enemy, and a fight would ensue. At first, it would look as if Popeye was going to get the worst of it by far. Then, when he had been pushed to the brink, he would say, "**I've had all I can stands and I can't stands no more!**" He would take a can of spinach from his back pocket or sock and down it in one swallow. The strength he received from the spinach would enable Popeye to easily conquer his foe and win the admiration of his girlfriend, **Olive Oyl**. (**All I can say about her is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder**.)

Did you know that there are moments in history when God seems to say to various elements of humanity, "**I've had all I can stands and I can't stands no more**?" Almost exclusively, these times have to do with the sinful rebellion of people created in His image and for whom He possesses a great, long-suffering love. He said this to the whole earth during the time of Noah and to the Israelites repeatedly throughout their history. **And such is the case in the text that we're studying this morning**.

The people of Nineveh and the Assyrians in general had lived in a cesspool of sin for most of their existence. **Not that they had an excuse for their wickedness**. The law of God written on their hearts brought a cloud of condemnation that constantly overshadowed them (**Romans 2:14-15 -- For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is <u>written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness</u>, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them)**. It took a while, but finally, they filled up the measure of their sin, and God's long-suffering came to an end. It's as if He said, "**I've had all I can stands and I can't stands no more.**" That's when God commissioned Jonah not once but twice to take the message to Nineveh: "**Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." <u>The once rebellious prophet was now as compliant as the wind, the sea, and the fish had been to God in the first two chapters of this book</u>**.

The word "**overthrow**" is used in **Genesis 19:25** to refer to the people of SODOM and GOMORRAH, whom God destroyed by raining down burning sulfur from heaven upon them. It can also mean to "**change**". **The Lord likely intended a double meaning in this warning**. **The only way the Ninevites could avoid being overthrown/destroyed was to CHANGE the way they were living, the very thing God had in mind by bringing them to repentance**! Let's take a few minutes and try to understand what constitutes TRUE REPENTANCE as we witness the hand of God at work in the people of Nineveh.

Repentance means ACKNOWLEDGING our sin (**Jonah 3:1-5a -- Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God**). When Jonah entered Nineveh, it was inhabited by about 120,000 people and had a circumference of about 7 1/2 miles. It took him three days to preach the message so that everyone could hear. **Surprisingly, their response to the Jewish prophet who had only recently spent 72 hours in the belly of a great fish was to believe his words**! They didn't question whether or not Jonah was speaking the truth or if God's actions were justified. They needed no one to tell them that they were a sinful and rebellious people who had earned everything they were about to receive. Their sin was ever before them.

What made them so sensitive to their own wrongdoing? Well, historians say that at about the time of Jonah's mission, the Assyrians had suffered a series of **famines, plagues, revolts and eclipses**, all of which were seen as OMENS of worse things to come. Some believe that this was God's way of preparing them for the prophet and his message. And it may have been why they heeded the decree of the king to "**turn each from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands**." They were already experiencing the birthpangs of divine judgment!

As I shared two weeks ago, the Assyrians were an unusually violent people. This was not only true of how they treated foreign nations, but it was also indicative of how they treated each other. In fact, their unjust, cruel and oppressive treatment of outsiders most likely stemmed from their similar treatment of each other. The wealthy enslaved the poor, who struck back by committing various crimes against the rich, with the cycle continually repeating itself. IT'S SAFE TO ASSUME THAT NINEVEH WAS NOT A VERY FUN PLACE TO LIVE.

There is a lesson to be learned here for all of us: **If you want to know how people from one place will behave toward people from another, just take a good look at how they behave toward one another**! Do they place a high premium on respecting each other? Do they value their neighbors? Do they practice social justice and caring for the less fortunate? THESE ACTIONS REVEAL THE CHARACTER OF A NATION.

When the Assyrians considered their evil ways, they knew they had some repenting. Surprisingly, that's when the Bible says, "**They believed God**." They heard the message from Jonah and needed no other convincing proofs that they were in danger of judgment. **This, by the way, is the first step in true repentance – to acknowledge one's sin.**

Repentance means GRIEVING our sin (**Jonah 3:5b-8 -- They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands**). ***The Hebrew word*** for repentance means "**a change of heart or disposition toward something or someone**." ***The Greek word*** means to "***perceive afterwards***." **A significant aspect of repentance, then, is to mourn a previous action or attitude as morally wrong and against everything for which God stands**.

I have been involved in a number of discussions with people who argue based on this definition that people have repented when they admit their sin. But to limit the definition of repentance to a change of mind is, of course, ridiculous. **Romans 12:2** informs us that ***when a mind changes, a life changes***. There are far-reaching

consequences to the person or people who come to understand that they are living in sin before a holy God. **One of these is the effect that awareness of sin has on our hearts or emotions**. When the Ninevites admitted that their actions had been morally reprehensible, it stirred their hearts to grieve and cry out to God with a sense of urgency. **The actions of fasting and putting on sackcloth by the people and the king, as well as the decree that everyone should turn from his evil way, are evidence of real repentance** (**See Nehemiah 9:1-2 for another example**). How can we be so sure that it was real? God spared them! I guarantee that if their response were not truly reflective of sincere grief over their deplorable sin, they would have received the full wrath of God.

It's important to recognize that repentance is not only the act of acknowledging our moral failure, but it is also to lament it. It means to be gripped with the wrongness of sin in such a way that our hearts are broken over a loss of fellowship with one another and God. **A similar message came from another prophet, Joel, regarding the Day of the Lord** -- **Joel 2:12-13 – Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." James, the half-brother of Jesus, said this about repentance -- James 4:8-10 -- Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you**).

Here's a word of warning this morning: Those of us who do not grieve their sin will sadly find our hearts hardened by it. In ***The Magician's Nephew***, one of the books in the series ***The Chronicles of Narnia*** by **C. S. Lewis**, **he writes of the creation of fictitious Narnia through the song of Aslan (the lion who represents Jesus in the series)**. **As in Genesis 1, it is a grand call to worship**, but there was one (**Uncle Andrew**) who would not hear it. He had allowed some things to creep into his heart that shouldn't have been there with devastating effect. Lewis writes, "*When the great moment came and the Beasts spoke, he missed the whole point, for a rather interesting reason. When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago, when it was still quite dark, he (Uncle Andrew) had realized that the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a Lion ("only a lion," as he said to himself), he tried his hardest to make himself believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing--only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. "Of course it can't really have been singing," he thought. "I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Whoever heard of a lion singing?" And the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring.* ***Now, the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed****. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon, he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to. And when at last the Lion spoke and said, "****Narnia awake****," he didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl. And when the beasts spoke in answer, he heard only barkings, growlings, bayings and howlings."* **Let me ask you, this morning … Has your heart become like Uncle Andrew's? Has Christianity become merely a religion to you instead of a call to worship? Perhaps it is because, in your failure to mourn your sin, you have allowed it to harden your heart. (Review: Repentance means ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR SIN; GRIEVING YOUR SIN.)**

Repentance means REMOVING our sin (**Jonah 7-10 -- And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, 8 but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. 9 Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it**). **It is not yet true repentance if we acknowledge sin and even grieve it**. We must also take any action necessary to remove it from our lives. **The decree of the king and his nobles called on the people to give up their evil ways and their violence**. **To have settled for anything less**

would have amounted to a futile attempt to mock God, something that is impossible to do -- **Galatians 6:7 -- Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked**). **The simple fact is that we cannot follow after God without taking whatever action necessary to loosen our grip on sin.** Jesus spoke to this in **Mark 9:43-47 -- And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell).** True repentance involves the removal of anything from our lives that would keep us from earnestly following Christ.

Review: Repentance involves ACKNOWLEDGING our sin; GRIEVING our sin; and REMOVING our sin.

If you think this sermon was aimed at the person down the aisle, you've missed the point. It's for all of us. There isn't a person in this room who is walking in perfect obedience to God. Either we have some things we should be doing, but aren't, or we have some things we are doing, but shouldn't be. The Biblical response to this situation is **REPENTANCE**.

Conclusion: On **Tuesday, July 20, 1993**, in a forest one hundred miles northeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, **Don Wyman** was cutting up a fallen tree. It was about 4:00 PM, and he was alone in the woods. When he finished one cut, tragedy struck. The tree snapped back in his direction and knocked him to the ground. The massive oak landed on his left leg, shattering the bone and tearing flesh. Pinned to the ground, Wyman screamed in pain. He tried to free himself by using the chainsaw that was still in his hands to cut away the tree, but he couldn't reach far enough. Then he tried to dig beneath his leg, but this also was to no avail. "**I'm going to bleed to death**," he thought. Then the idea hit him. He had a pocket knife in his jacket. If he took the cord from the chainsaw and tied it firmly around his upper left leg, he could then use the knife to sever the limb and free himself from the fallen tree. Somehow, he managed to do just that. Though the blood flow had been slowed, it had not been stopped. Wyman knew he needed help fast. He crawled 135 feet uphill over loose gravel to his bulldozer. Then he drove it 1/4 mile to his truck, all the while clutching the make-shift tourniquet. The truck had a manual transmission, but he managed to shift by using a metal file to depress the clutch. He drove to a farmer's house 1 1/2 miles away, stopped his vehicle and yelled, "**I cut my leg off! Help me! I'm bleeding to death**." The farmer phoned for emergency help, and Wyman's life was saved.

When Don Wyman was in the woods, he came to realize that though his leg was dear to him, keeping it would cost him his life. Some of us have certain sins that are also dear to us. <u>We cling to them because the thought of living without them is more frightening than living with them</u>. Releasing our grip on a particular sin that has over time brought us some sort of perverted comfort and satisfaction is like cutting off a leg when pinned under a tree. **It's very scary, but if we don't do it, the results can be far worse**.