

# “Welcome to Nineveh” by John Morris

January 24,  
2021



## The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

I'm going to be preaching a sermon that I'll bet is similar to the ones being preached in thousands of pulpits across the United States this morning. Not only do we Christians have a common lectionary, we all lived through the same week, we share a national story that pulls us all along in its wake, and what happened on January 20<sup>th</sup> can't be neglected, at least not by me. How well I remember the heavy feeling of doom that seemed to descend on me on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It felt like the clouds would never break – and indeed, it has been a long long four years. But to everything there is a season, and now the moment of jubilee, however temporary, has come.

And if anyone among us isn't rejoicing at the inauguration of this particular president, surely we can all, Democrat or Republican, conservative or progressive, celebrate that the transfer of power was safe, secure, and part of an unbroken chain of such democratic moments stretching back to 1796. So, can I get a HALLELUJAH!? Hallelujah!

Okay, that was the easy part. So I want to talk about transition, and repentance, and forgiveness, and moving forward. Another reason why I'm sure a lot of preachers are taking up this theme is that the lectionary reading from Jonah is eerily appropriate, so that's where I'll start.

The reading is very short – too short, if you ask me. For one thing, it begins in the middle of the story, and unless you already know the story, you would have no idea that this “second time” the word of the Lord comes to Jonah is right after the poor guy has spent three days in the belly of a large fish, which in turn came after he'd been thrown overboard during a fearsome storm, which in turn happened basically at his request, since he felt responsible for the fate of the ship because . . . well, anyway, if you don't know the story, my telling it backwards isn't going to be much help.

The point is, when Jonah hears the Holy One tell him a second time to go to Nineveh and proclaim a message, it's a teachable moment for him. The Holy One, you might say, has got his attention. This reading also omits the content of the message, but you can find it earlier in the story, and in any case you can infer it from what Jonah does when he gets there. He cries out to all who will listen, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people believe him, and from the king on down, they repent, and God relents, and Nineveh is saved.

But the reading not only starts in the middle, it ends in the middle. For all we know from this very selective choice of scripture, Jonah went happily off after saving the Ninevites. But the best part of the story is still to come. Something about all this really bothers Jonah. Jonah is “greatly displeased” with God, and it's not at all clear why. I've read several commentaries on these passages, and there doesn't seem to be any consensus. Basically, I think Jonah is saying, “God, I should have known you wouldn't do this terrible thing

to Nineveh; you're too kind, too slow to anger. But you've gone through this whole charade, using me as the main character, and for what? To forgive a people who don't deserve forgiveness. I don't like it, and if I'm wrong, kill me, whatever." And I can't leave this story without quoting part of God's response, which is surely one of the few moments in the Hebrew Scriptures where we find the Holy One in a faintly humorous mood. God says to Jonah, "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left [or, as we might say today, their ass from their elbow], and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" Either this is sarcasm or I've lost my ability to read literature. God is saying, "Yes, Jonah, I know, this 'great city' is full of idiots, more or less on a par with their cattle, and yet something had to be done so I did it. And by the way, please don't question *how* I did it, or why I brought you into it."

Well, there are a lot of themes to be drawn out of this. Here's the one I want to talk about: The Ninevites believe that God will respond to them; they can change God's mind. Jonah doesn't say this; he only makes a prediction: You've got forty days and then it's over. But the people conclude that they can do something about this. And it turns out that they're right. The scripture tells us, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God had a change of mind."

Let me just pause and say that again: "God had a change of mind." Have we touched on the part that displeased Jonah so much? God was all set to bring the law down on the heads of the Ninevites (who by the way were Assyrians, infamous for their cruelty and autocracy). But God instead gave them another chance. I can well imagine that, if Jonah thought this was far too lenient, indeed unjust, then he would have particularly resented being the chosen messenger who brought it about.

So here we have a community – what the Greeks would call a *polis*, from which we get our words “politics” and “political” – that has sinned, that has been wicked. The community is frightened of God’s judgment, turns away from evil, and is spared.

It is tempting to draw some obvious parallels. I wonder how much of the rest of the world sees the United States as Assyria, and here in our capital city, Nineveh, we are being given a new start, a second chance.

Now you may have noticed that a lot of political leaders and their enraged supporters have not, to put it mildly, yet repented. Quite the opposite. And so, like Jonah, we could start drafting a retributive agenda for God to carry out based on this shocking example of human nature, which of course none of us has ever personally been guilty of. Instead, let me suggest that we worry about our own shortcomings, our own failures to join our nature fully with God’s. At least that way we can set a good example. Who knows? Maybe we can even, all by ourselves, change God’s mind.

Of course what I really want is what Jonah wanted. I want God’s mind to change in regard to *my* sins, but I want the full measure of his justice to be meted out to the unrepentant Ninevites. Hmmm....

I listened to Paul Simon’s song, “American Tune,” this week. Finding it on YouTube, I discovered that many many other Americans have also been listening. This song was written 48 years ago – can you imagine?! We are old! It was the height of the Watergate scandal, probably the last time we’ve had any serious fears about whether our democracy was threatened, what Paul Simon calls “the age’s most uncertain hours.” There is a terribly sad note of acceptance in this song, culminating in the lyric, “You can’t be forever blessed.” Acceptance, and also clear-eyed hope, because the last lines remind us, “Tomorrow’s going to be another working day,” and only by

putting one such day of work in front of the next will we build God's community on earth.

We Christians know that – we know that God's community can't be identified with a single country – though so many other Americans who also call themselves Christians would vehemently disagree with me. But we are not those sort of Christians. We don't – or at least I don't – believe God looks with especial favor on the United States. We sin, we go astray, we fail to live up to even the minimal ideals of good government and basic justice, and sometimes we flat out lie about it. We have to do better, and by we I mean we. It is not enough to say that the bad guys won for four years, and now the good guys are back, if that happens to be what you believe. I do think there is a sense in which that's true, but it's not helpful and it's not fair to stop there. The question I think we need to ask, urgently, is: What more can we Christians do? What more *should* we have done? Not just since 2016, but since 1776. We all got ourselves into this mess together. How is it that we are still so far short of securing for every citizen the basic rights and opportunities enjoyed by a few? Why are we still unable to find our right place in the natural world God made? Has our faith in Christ really been so lukewarm, so slow to kindle fire? Is it really the fault of the bad guys?

I guess another way of saying this is that everyone can find something to repent, when we think about how we've acted as citizens. I'm not engaging in false equivalences. Joining a MAGA mob to storm the Capitol is not equivalent to the thousand small acts of ignorance and compromise and privilege, however well-meaning, that we all engage in, whose cumulative result is the perpetuation of an unjust status quo. No, not equivalent – but in the eyes of God, we must remember that we are Ninevites. It is up to us to hear the Jonahs among us. And what may be even harder, we have to accept the forgiveness and love of the Holy One. It rains down on the just and the

unjust. We don't get to pick. The Holy One is not bound by rules and consequences. I can imagine standing before God and hearing God's voice: "I forgive those idiots who didn't know their right hand from their left, who raised false flags and took My name in vain. They know not what they do. Now tell me, what must *you* repent of, who claim to know so much better than they?" If I heard that, I might, like Jonah, start arguing my case, or even wishing I was back in the belly of the fish.

One more thing. One of my best friends at Seekers often reminds me that who is President, which party is in power, matters very little to millions of our fellow Americans. These men and women and children have had a hard time all their lives, as have their parents and their grandparents, and the inauguration of the 46<sup>th</sup> president is not going to change that one bit, at least not right now. Let's not get all carried away about who is in charge. It's the least of these that Jesus told us to remember, not the bosses.

So, on this first Sunday after the inauguration, I find myself identifying with the Ninevites, and trying to hear God's call to repentance. I find myself identifying with the Jonah who does God's work but then doesn't like the result, who can't understand why God's justice is not more like his. Can I – can we – also identify with Jonah the prophet? Are we willing to carry the message even if we don't always understand it or even like it? That is what I'm trying to do this morning. I see Christ's message as ultimately one of mercy and forgiveness. And in this case, as a political person, as a citizen, I don't like it! I want accountability and justice and consequences to be the end of the story. And I do pray that these things will come about; I think there is no way to skip them; I believe they will be good for our country. But then comes the really hard part. Much as I might wish otherwise, here is God's voice, speaking through James 2:13: "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Holy One, please teach me how to be merciful, both to myself and to others, in the difficult months and years ahead. Amen.