

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church  
on January 21, 2024.**

**BELIEVE AND REPENT**

*<Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; Mark 1:14-28>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

If you had to distill an understanding of your faith down to six words, how would you proceed? What would you say?

There has been a trend, in writing circles that has cropped up every so often over the past years: write a story in only six words. Correct or not, such a challenge is attributed to Ernest Hemingway in the 1920's claiming he could write the most tragic story in six words. He won this challenge by writing, "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn." Others have followed in this trend over the years with examples such as, "Eventually they lived happily ever," and "I traveled and found my home." Theologians have even taken on the challenge, with my favorite coming from Nadia Bolz-Weber, "We are who God says we are."

But as much as this trend seems to have taken root recently, it can be traced all the way back to the Hebrew prophet of Jonah, at the least, though his self-imposed challenge was to use eight words instead of six.

Jonah, if you need a reminder of his story beyond being swallowed by a great fish, had been sent by God to the great and pagan city of Nineveh to proclaim a call to repentance and change of heart. Nineveh, in Jonah's opinion, was a wicked city not worthy of redemption or of God's grace. In fact, we could say that Jonah hated the very idea of Nineveh receiving grace. So much so that, when he received this command from God, Jonah ran in the complete opposite direction. Which is what took him to the boat crossing the Mediterranean in the first place, from which he was thrown overboard and swallowed by the great fish. Given a second chance after a repentance of his own in the fish's belly, Jonah is spat up on shore and goes on to Nineveh, but he still goes grudgingly. And this is where our reading this morning picks up the story.

Jonah has arrived in Nineveh, a city which, the Scripture says, "takes three days to walk across." In his grudging and resistant mindset, Jonah goes a mere day's worth into the city, proclaiming God's message in eight words only. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

No discussion on *why* Nineveh would receive such a fate. And certainly no word on how to avoid such an end. In a paucity of words, Jonah proclaims only what he wants: Nineveh shall be overthrown. We could even speculate that Jonah wanted Nineveh to fall, and even though he was there on God's command, he was going to withhold from

them the directions on how to repent and thus become open to God's grace. He chooses, as a prophet of God, to offer them only what he wants them to hear. The keys to repentance and how to go about such a change of heart - for that is what the Greek work for repentance, "*metanoia*," translates as: "change of heart" - all that is withheld, and Jonah offers a bare minimum.

But we forget, all too easily, what God can do with what we think is not enough.

If Jonah uses only eight words, Jesus expands on that slightly by using ten words when, in Mark's gospel, he calls Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."

And again, here we see that Jesus does not first begin with a survey course on the "Introduction of Discipleship" or a lengthy discourse on what it will require and mean to be a follower. He simply, straightforwardly makes the invitation and extends the call: "Follow me." In this simple phrase, in this paucity of words, Jesus shows the extravagant impact of what God can do with what we might deem to be too little.

Which brings us to a notable perspective: the starting point is not a place of our need to get it right first so that we may then believe. Rather, it is the reverse: we believe, and in that belief repentance truly becomes possible. In that is the work of God made evident, before we could ever undertake such a work ourselves.

I don't know that I could state that frequently enough. We often think we must repent, and repent *perfectly* before we can believe. As if we are not worthy of belief unless we have first completed, correctly, the work of repentance. In truth, our repentance - our changing of mind and turning of heart back toward God - will never be complete unless we begin with belief: belief that God desires this for us, belief that Jesus calls & invites us to this, belief in the grace that is freely offered and given before we even begin to make such a turn. Without this belief, coming first, we can never hope to see any repentance, any growth and development, completed in the Spirit of God.

Not long ago, a church member approached me with a thought troubling them about our time of Confession and Assurance, and how quickly it feels that we move from one to the other. "It seems strange to me," they said, "that we could go from being sinners to being forgiven in so short a period of time" as the few moments of silence between the Prayer of Confession and the Assurance of Pardon. Almost as if we are merely giving it lip service. In truth, though, we are forgiven even before we pray, before we repent. Our journey into wholeness starts with the forgiveness being offered; our repentance is the reality of accepting that and determining to change and be better. God's grace precedes our act of repentance.

We see the evidence of this played out in the life of the disciples as they indeed get up and follow Jesus, leaving behind their previous life and undertaking this new, unknown life. Their belief paved the way for the repentance and dedication that was to follow, in all its imperfection and its majesty.

Similarly with Jonah, though he went about a third of the way into Nineveh and spoke very little, the people of the city - from its ruler to its most common citizen - believed, and in that belief, they repented. And it was as Jonah feared: God was gracious and forgiving, leading the entire city into a new life and a new way of being. God can do more with eight words than we believe imaginable. And isn't always for just one purpose alone.

Jesus' call to the disciples changes them, both their inward as well as their outward lives. It is a call to grow and develop, individually and communally, but it is also a call to help guide and change the world for the better through the proclamation and living of good news. God's call to Jonah was as much to change Jonah (for the better) as it was to the city and people of Nineveh, to change through belief and repentance. We never quite learn if Jonah took the lesson to heart, but that becomes an example to us to examine our own hearts and lives. We know the impact of the disciples after their belief takes hold, and they practice repentance, over and over again throughout their lives and ministries. Stemming from what seems to be so little as six to eight words, the world is changed. Because God can do great things with little.

What might your six or eight words be, if you were to sum up the gospel of good news for the sake of proclamation? For the sake of a mantra to guide your daily living, breathing, and prayer? "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner," perhaps? Or maybe, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief"? Personally, I am partial to, "I have come that they may have life." Whatever it is, remember that it is not just these words, but it is the presence and work of the Spirit to guide us in turning our hearts toward God, and living as such a people in the presence of God. Amen.