

“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. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.”

“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.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I learned a new word this week. It is the word, *epicaricacy*. My guess is that no one here knows the meaning of that word. It is rarely used. My word processor’s dictionary doesn’t recognize it. While you may not know the meaning of the word *epicaricacy*, you may be familiar with the concept. There is a German word that is likely more familiar than this English word. That word is *schadenfreude*. Schadenfreude is the feeling of pleasure, joy, or self-satisfaction that comes from learning of or witnessing the troubles, failures, pain, or humiliation of another person.

Now, I’m sure that no one would ever want to admit to feeling *schadenfreude* or *epicaricacy*. It isn’t something that we, as the people of God, should feel towards others. Yet if we are honest with ourselves and with God, we have to admit that there are times when we feel smug satisfaction at the misfortunes of others. If someone cuts you off in traffic, goes speeding down the road like a madman, don’t you smile if you see that person being pulled over by the police and getting a ticket? Don’t we like it to see the smart-aleck, who acts as if they know everything, being humiliated when someone smarter and wiser puts them down? Of course, we justify our feeling of *schadenfreude* by pointing out that these people are getting what they deserve. If that person hadn’t been speeding, he wouldn’t have gotten the ticket. If that know-it-all had been a bit more humble, they wouldn’t have been so embarrassed.

Jonah felt *schadenfreude*—or more precisely, he wanted to feel *schadenfreude* towards Nineveh. It all starts when God has a task for Jonah: *“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.’”* (Jonah 1:1–2, ESV) As God so often does, He sends His prophets and preachers to proclaim His law and truth to those who have turned from Him. He does this because He is a merciful God, who says: *“As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”* (Ezekiel 33:11, ESV) Paul tells Timothy that God: *“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”* (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV) Unfortunately, Jonah felt very differently. Jonah hated the Ninevites and did not want God to show them mercy. We could spend a fair bit of time talking about the cruelty of the Ninevites. This capital city of Assyria wasn’t a centre of morality in the ancient world. Their wickedness was to satisfy their evil desires. The prophet Nahum speaks against Assyria and Nineveh noting that the people lived: *“all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms.”* (Nahum 3:4, ESV) The people of Israel had experienced the cruelty of Assyria more often than I’m sure even Jonah could remember.

Why would God want to spare such a city? He shouldn’t, at least in Jonah’s opinion. Jonah wanted to feel *schadenfreude*. He wanted to rejoice in their suffering. That is why he fled in the opposite direction. The story of the reluctant prophet is well known; how God sent a great storm that would sink the ship on which Jonah was travelling. Jonah finally admits what he has done and tells the sailors to throw him into the sea. When they do, God appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah, who spends three days in the belly of that fish. At least it gave him time to contemplate his actions.

Jonah deserved death, not deliverance. Yet God reveals His mercy for this disobedient prophet. The fish saves him. Jonah realizes this. He even says in prayer: *“I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.”* (Jonah 2:4, ESV) And he clearly notes: *“But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”* (Jonah 2:9, ESV)

Now, after the fish vomits him out on dry land, and hopefully more aware of the mercy of God, Jonah is told: **“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”** This time Jonah obeys. He preaches the law of God, warning the people: **“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** His preaching meets with great success. We are told: **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.** This was what God wanted. God is not a tolerant God. He doesn't turn a blind eye to sin. He will punish. Yet He is also a merciful and gracious God. When God had revealed Himself to Israel at Mount Sinai, He described Himself as **“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”** (Exodus 34:6, ESV) That description of God is repeated throughout the Scriptures, even by Jonah himself, although he uses that wonderful description of God's mercy to grumble against God! As God had been gracious to Jonah, so He was gracious to the Ninevites, too. The preaching of the Word turned the hearts of the people. God shows His love is for all, even for those we may deem unworthy of that love. Our text ends with a word of grace: **“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.”**

If we put ourselves into the account of Jonah, where would we see ourselves? Would we be like the Ninevites, living to serve ourselves, with little thought to God and His truth? The world is very alluring to our sinful hearts. One of the saddest verses in the letters of Paul comes as he tells us: **“For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.”** (2 Timothy 4:10, ESV) There are times when we are in love with the world; times when we have left the Lord; times when we go our own way, expecting God to be tolerant of our sinful ways. Rather than being tolerant, God calls us to repentance and wants us to turn from our ways and to find our forgiveness and life in Him. We can be sure that God never feels schadenfreude towards us. He feels no joy in our suffering. He doesn't want us to get what we deserve. What a blessing it is to hear the words of the psalmist: **“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”** (Psalm 103:8-12, ESV)

Like the Ninevites, may we indeed hear the word and turn from our sins! But what if we are like Jonah? It can be so easy, so tempting to think that those loveless, evil and vile sinners around us should get what they deserve. We may decide that we don't want them to hear the Word of the Gospel. We want to feel some schadenfreude because of the way we, as Christian and because of the way the church is often treated by the world today. But God loves today's Ninevites. God loves today's Jonahs. That is why He sent His Son into this world. God has a great, abounding, steadfast and impossible love for the loveless: for Jonah, for the people of Nineveh, for you and for me, and yes for all the people of our world. On the cross, so long ago, Jesus showed the love He has for you and for all—a love beyond imagination, a love without limits. He willingly, faithfully, lovingly took your sins, my sins and the sins of the whole world into Himself, to pay the price for our sins and to cover us with His righteousness. That dying Saviour is also the victorious risen Lord, who brings life where there was only death, who gives hope in the hopelessness of this world. We look forward to life in its fulness and glory, as we are joined with the Saviour, who died for us and who is risen from the dead.

Just as Jonah and just as the Ninevites have been forgiven, so we have been forgiven. In that forgiveness God sends us, like Jonah, to go into the world and proclaim His truth. In our epistle today, Paul reminds us that the time is short. This world is passing away. God will deal with sin and unbelief. Even though He is a God of love, His wrath against sin cannot be ignored. Yes, His love is shown to the loveless, but His love is not indifferent or what the world wants to think of as tolerant and accepting. He doesn't let people wallow in their sin. Again, as Ezekiel reminded us: **“As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live”.** (Ezekiel 33:11, ESV) That is why God sent Jonah to Nineveh. That is why we see our dear Saviour calling Peter and Andrew, James and John, telling them: **“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”** (Mark 1:17, ESV) That is why our Saviour calls us to carry on that task. Is that message always going to be received as it was by the people of Nineveh? God grant that it will be! Yet we know from our Saviour that there those who have ears, but won't hear or listen. They have eyes, but won't see the truth. Sadly, many will reject the message. But even though it may be a challenge, we witness to the Ninevites of our day and age. We show love to the loveless because we are loved by God. We remember what the hymn writer said:

My song is love unknown, My Savior's love to me, Love to the loveless shown That they might lovely be.
Oh, who am I That for my sake My Lord should take Frail flesh and die?

Here might I stay and sing, No story so divine! Never was love, dear King, Never was grief like Thine.
This is my friend, In whose sweet praise I all my days Could gladly spend! (LSB 430, st. 1, 7)