**Graphical user interface, text

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceJonah 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.*

There are few things that people seem to love more than a good upset. You know, when there’s an assumed outcome, when the odds appear to be stacked squarely in one side’s favor, and then the little guy wins? Think like David and Goliath. The American Colonists defeating the powerful British. The 1980 Olympic Miracle on Ice with the college athletes from the United States taking down that fearsome team from the Soviet Union. Yes, upsets are satisfying. They make good books, good movies, the stories get told and retold, handed down through the generations.

Upsets are satisfying—unless, of course, you’re on the losing end. Then it’s. . .upsetting, I guess we could say. I reckon it was very upsetting for the Philistines to watch as their champion was beheaded. It was upsetting to the British when they lost their hold on the Americas. It was upsetting to the Soviets to see their team come home with the silver rather than the gold.

Well, in our text before us this morning, and really through the entire book of Jonah, we read about one of the greatest upsets in human history. Essentially, we have one of the most godless, irreverent, inhumane civilizations in world history standing condemned by the almighty God. The expectation is that God will destroy that city just as He had done to Sodom and Gomorrah, those other highly ungodly places. And the upset is that God relents. The people of Nineveh repent, and God holds back His wrath, showing them mercy instead. And it was upsetting—not to God, certainly not to Nineveh, but—to Jonah, God’s prophet. He was upset because God showed mercy to *Nineveh*, and yet that’s the nature of mercy, isn’t it? It goes to people that don’t deserve it. The theme we’ll be considering is:

**History’s Great Upset: God Shows Mercy**I. Even to Nineveh   
II. Even to Jonah  
III.Even to me

Of course, when we hear the name Jonah or read from the book of Jonah, the first thing that comes to mind is Jonah in the belly of the great fish. That’s a very well-known account, even among non-Christian people. Jonah chapter 1: God calls to Jonah, tells him to go to Nineveh, Jonah runs the opposite direction. He’s in a boat, storm on the sea, Jonah thrown overboard, swallowed by the great fish where he resides for three days and three nights. Jonah chapter 2: Jonah prays to God from the belly of that great fish, fish vomits Jonah up on the seashore. All of it miraculous, yet it all would have been just a cute story if it weren’t for the great miracle that followed. That miracle is what we read about here in our text. It is the miracle, and I do mean miracle, of an entire godless city repenting of their sin and turning to the one true God.

Now, Nineveh was the capital city of the ancient empire of Assyria. It was a fearsome military power whose armies were as dreaded as they were efficient. They dealt cruelly with those whom they conquered. They were a ravenous people; like a lion seizing and tearing up its prey, Assyria swallowed up surrounding nations left and right. The only real contender in the balance of power in that part of the world was Egypt. And the only real buffer between the kingdom of Egypt to the south and the empire of Assyria to the north was the nation of Israel, smack dab in the middle.

Enter Jonah—a prophet from Israel in service to the Lord; he is sent by God to Nineveh with a pointed message: ***“Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”*** Not a surprise really, after all we know that God hates sin, He hates when His creation worships the creation rather than the Creator—and Nineveh was certainly not innocent on those accounts. We also know that God frequently was overthrowing the surrounding nations that threatened His people Israel, after all the goal was to keep a people separate from the world, one that would be prepared for the coming Messiah.

But God’s intent here was *not* actually to overthrow the city of Nineveh. If that were the case, He would not have commanded His prophet to leave His people of Israel and go to speak with them, and He would not have given them a 40-day warning. He could have immediately destroyed them with fire and brimstone as He had done with Sodom and Gomorrah if He wanted to. Yes, that is how far the wrath of God can go, but with Nineveh we see how far God extends His grace and mercy. He explains Himself through the prophet Ezekiel, ***“‘As I live,’ says 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)

So, He sends Jonah with a simple message, and the people repent. Every one of them, from the King on down, ***“Believed God,”*** we are told. The Hebrew word used there for “believed” is *A-mēn,* which is where we get our word, “Amen” from. When we close our prayers with “amen,” that doesn’t mean, “The end,” it means, “Yes indeed it shall be so!” Such was the same confidence of the Ninevites when they heard the message from God. They believed God with certainty, they put on sackcloth and sat in ashes, which was an ancient sign of repentance and sorrow over sin. And God looked into their hearts and knew that this was a real change, ***“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.”***

This was one of the great upsets of human history. Nineveh was destined for destruction, a completely godless nation, enemies of God’s chosen people, and they believed in God and repented. It’s shocking to see these results, but these are the lengths of God’s mercy. Still working our way through the season of Epiphany as we are, there are so many examples of God showing mercy to the undeserving in our recent memory. We can think of those wise men, court magicians from a foreign land, whom God led to His Son’s feet by the miraculous star. We can think of Simeon and Anna, two simple elderly people whom God gave the opportunity to see the Savior in person. We can think of the shepherds, generally pretty low down most people’s radars, yet the first visitors to their Savior’s throne. Or even Mary and Joseph, just poor commoners, given the special task of raising the Son of God. In every one of these examples—pure grace and mercy—God showing love to people who simply didn’t deserve it. Those examples give us that nice, warm fuzzy feeling.

But a place like Nineveh, that’s a different matter altogether. By our sinful estimation, we might think that here God’s mercy had gone too far. But God loved the city of Nineveh. In fact, in the Hebrew, in verse three of our text, it literally says, ***“Nineveh was a great city. . . to God.”*** God cared about Nineveh—not because it was a wealthy city, not because it was the capital of Assyria, not because it was a strategic location—but because it had people living there. People that did not know the Lord and did not want to know the Lord, yet for whom Jesus the Son of God would die. Just like the rest of the individuals we considered, these were sinners to whom God desired to show mercy. So, He sent His messenger with a message, **even to the people of Nineveh**, knowing His Word would save them.

Now, Jonah was no stranger to the fact that God’s Word could make such a change. In a lesser-known account from the book of 2 Kings, Jonah appears, delivering another message from the Lord. He was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had by-in-large been very faithless toward the Lord, from the King on down. Gradually, the Lord allowed enemies to start encroaching on their territory, taking land from the Israelites. But then we’re told, ***“God saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel,”*** (2 Kings 14:26) and God had mercy on *them*. He showed mercy by sending this same Jonah to tell the people that they would get their lands back. And wouldn’t you know it, Israel’s borders were expanded and secured.

So, Jonah knew about Nineveh, he knew how wicked they were, he heard the call from God to go bring them to repentance, and he also knew first-hand the power of God’s Word to bring great change. And that was the problem for Jonah. You see, when we learn this story in Sunday School as children, I think we usually come away with the idea that Jonah ran away from Nineveh because he was scared, because they were the big, mean bad guys. But that wasn’t the reason that Jonah ran. Jonah ran because he wanted to see Nineveh punished, and he knew that his going to Nineveh with God’s powerful Word might bring out a change. In fact, he admitted it. He prays to God in the next chapter and says, ***“O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”*** (Jonah 4:2)

Let’s not lose sight of just how terribly wicked this mindset was. Jonah knew that those Ninevites, living in unbelief were destined for hell; Jonah knew that if they heard God’s Word and repented, God would forgive them. That made Jonah mad. Other than the general lack of love on Jonah’s part, what else does this attitude reveal about him? It shows that Jonah had forgotten all about the grace and mercy that God had already shown to *him*. Nineveh’s suffering mattered to Jonah, because apparently it made him feel better about himself.

So, he goes and shares this message from God, and in chapter 4, he camps outside the city on a hill to get a good view of God’s fury. Why would their destruction make him feel better? It doesn’t take too much imagination to figure out his possible reasoning—it would be them and not him. “*I* have been a follower of God, and *they* have chosen otherwise. They deserve everything they are getting.” Yes, this is an arrogance that displays he’d forgotten that the only reason *he* wasn’t destroyed was because of God’s mercy too. Afterall, he should have been long through the digestive tract of a great fish by this point, that or at least his carcass should have been decaying at the bottom of the sea.

But none of that happened because God **showed mercy even to Jonah.** And He would do so again. God took this prophet, a terribly unfit workman for the task at hand, and showed him through the people of Nineveh just how far His mercy would go. It ended up serving as a good reminder to Jonah, that he too was totally dependent on God’s forgiveness and mercy, for he deserved destruction no less than Nineveh did. And by the direction of the Holy Spirit, he wrote this book, displaying all of his warts in all their ugliness, so that *we* wouldn’t forget that *we too* need God’s mercy.

You see, it doesn’t take much imagination to see how we have often acted just like Jonah. How frequently we couldn’t be bothered to invite someone to church to bring them to the heart-changing Word of God, because we often simply don’t care about them. How frequently we have given up on individuals, saying, “They won’t change. I think we’re past any hope of them changing. I give up.” How frequently we revel in the idea of our enemies in this world getting their just desserts on Judgment Day. Yes, we are very much like Jonah. Comfortable seeing God’s mercy extended to some people that don’t deserve it like ourselves, but deep down we pretend that while we don’t deserve it, we still deserve it more than *some* people.

This is a terribly wicked attitude, a bitter root that we need to dig up out of our hearts and ask God for His mercy and forgiveness for. Because with this attitude, we are denying that we are only here by God’s undeserved mercy and grace and thereby are denying our Savior. Yes, we deserve God’s destruction, we ought to be the vessels that God pours out His wrath into. God should treat us like Nineveh, for we are no better.

And here’s the great upset: God does treat us like Nineveh. Because we are a people exceedingly great to God. In the upset of all upsets, ***“God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem”*** us who were crushed under that law, ***“so that we might receive the adoption as [God’s] sons.”*** (Galatians 4:4-5) That Son of God, he spoke about Jonah to His disciples, He said, ***“Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*** (Matthew 12:40) He’d be dead and in the ground, having taken on the punishment that we all deserve due to our sin. And how terribly upsetting those three days were for His disciples.

And then came the real upset. From the jaws of death, Christ walked out with the victory. He rose, securing your victory over death, securing your forgiveness from the consequences of your many sins. He shows you mercy. He continues to forgive you daily. He continues to bear patiently with us, suffering long with our stubbornness, and tenderly leading us back to Him through repentance. Yes, God shows us mercy, unbelievable as that may seem. Just as He spared the people of Nineveh, forgiving them for their wickedness, so He does for us; and He does not do so grudgingly.

Instead, He invites us to re-examine our hearts daily, to reconsider the mercy which He’s shown to each of us. He cries out to you today, ***"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”*** (Isaiah 55:6-7) Thanks be to God for not giving us what we have deserved, instead placing our sin upon His Son. Thanks be to God for showing mercy to even us, even when we are often unwilling to do the same. May the Lord help us each to live our lives fully aware of His mercy and grace, joyfully marveling at the lengths to which God has gone to save us. Amen.