



Sunday, June 7, 2020  
*Sermon Series: Didn't See It Coming*

How Cynicism Snuffs Out Hope  
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

### **Jonah 3:1-10 NRSV**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." <sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup>Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

This Sunday feels a lot different than last Sunday. A week ago fires still smoldered in Minneapolis. Antagonism between protesters and police hit a boiling point. Everything felt fragile, volatile, dangerous.

But in the week since, people have donated hundreds and hundreds of bags of groceries and diapers. Volunteers have brought brooms and trash bags to

clean up broken storefronts and graffitied property. Peaceful marchers have been waving signs and calling for reform; police officers have been kneeling in solidarity. There have been signs of hope that maybe things will finally change.

Or will they? It's cynical to think that in a couple of weeks even this will be pushed off the front page, our attention on to the next thing. But if you look back at history, that's probably true. George Floyd's murder has brought a tremendous outcry for racial equality. But. It's been 401 years since slave ships showed up on our shores. It's been over half a century since the civil rights movement. The list of black men and women who have died at the hands of police keeps growing. Have we made any progress? Will we ever?

If you're feeling this way, you are not alone. Whether it's civil rights or school shootings or world peace, we want to believe things can get better, but time and again the outrage fades and people move on. And slowly it can discourage even the most passionate observer.

Pastor Carey Nieuwhof argues that for most people, it's a gradual evolution – from idealism to optimism to realism to pessimism to cynicism. Face enough disappointment, and you begin you tell yourself that nothing you can do will make a difference. A little voice in your head whispers, "People don't really care. They'll take advantage of you. They can't be trusted." In time that voice becomes louder. "Last time I tried I was just shot down. I'm tired of caring. I don't want to get hurt." Go through enough and the voice becomes a shout. "It doesn't matter. Why even bother?"

Cynicism makes us jaded and bitter. It steals away hope. You start to expect the worst of people, and maybe even of life.

Just look to Jonah if you want to see how cynicism can suck all the joy out of you.

Now, to be fair, Jonah had cause to be angry. God wanted him to go up to Ninevah. To raise his voice about the injustice and evil he saw. But Ninevah represented the country that had oppressed God's people. In Jonah's mind, they weren't worth saving.

But the real reason Jonah is angry isn't because the people of Ninevah proved him wrong. It's because God proved him right.

You see, when Jonah finally made it to Ninevah, when he finally realized he couldn't run from God, he wandered in and delivered one of the shortest sermons in history. "40 days and Ninevah will be overthrown." It's only 5

words in Hebrew. It wasn't real enthusiastic, but it was effective. The king repented. He called for the whole country to repent too. Even the animals were to be covered in sackcloth and ashes. It's an evangelist's dream ...

... but a cynic's nightmare. Because having the people of Ninevah apologize was the absolute last thing Jonah wanted. He didn't want to be proven right here - and he was. See, God, he says, I knew you would do this. I knew you wouldn't ever change. I wanted you to punish them. You gave them a chance. And now you've offered forgiveness and mercy to people who don't deserve it. Jonah sulks and stewes. He indulges in self-pity. And his heart seems as hard as it can be.

Read on into chapter 4 and you see that at the end of the parable, God asks Jonah a key question: *shouldn't my love extend to all?* People of all races and backgrounds. Believers and unbelievers. The deserving and the undeserving. Even the animals.

God leaves that question in Jonah's lap. It's the point God makes to Jonah, and it's the point God makes to us. Frankly, it's the question every cynic should ask themselves: even if our efforts come to naught, does that mean they're not worth doing?

After all, bearing God's word of mercy and love means doing it unceasingly. Until the wrong is made right. Until all people are treated with dignity and fairness. Until the systems that have perpetuated inequality are taken apart, piece by piece. Even if we don't believe it will ever happen, we are called to do something.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that, "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of injustice. We are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

Or, as I saw on a sign at a protest march this week: "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept."

That, friends, is how to break the cycle of cynicism that nothing will get better. It has become achingly obvious that things have to be different. Tens of thousands of people around the world are marching in protest. We are seeing with our own eyes what people in power are willing to do to keep it.

Will this be the tipping point that finally exposes the ugly truths about just how far we still have to go? Will this be the breach in the dam that forces us to admit that the system just isn't working? I pray to God that it is so.

But my inner cynic's voice is persistent. And so I know that I need to do a whole lot more to be part of the solution. I need to name the implicit biases

that spur my reactions. I need to be ok with being uncomfortable. I need to pray for God to work in my heart and keep me honest. And maybe you do too.

The good news is that there is another way: be curious. Carey Nieuwhof suggests that curiosity is the best way to circumvent the cynicism that can keep us from acting. Cultivate a genuine sense of wonder in your heart, Nieuwhof writes. Ask 'why' and 'why not' a lot, and then listen - really listen - to the answers you get. It's why a good education is always at the heart of a just society. Because learning more about what we see exposes what needs to be changed.

So, friends, as I look around at the world right now, that's what I'm trying to do. I'm seeking out articles, blogs, and books that make me uncomfortable. I'm a reader, so I'm looking for things that stretch me. A few this week: an excellent blog post by Pastor Angela Denker on "[The Paternalistic Racism of Nice White People](#)." An article about [why rioting is sometimes the best response](#). A [column by a former white supremacist](#) exploring the miniscule ways he felt slipped into radical hate.

None of these things made me feel good when I read them. But they did open my mind and spark a curiosity that I hope will pull me out of cynicism.

Friends, this is hard work. It's especially hard when we've been burned before. But Jesus calls us to care about others' feelings. About their stories. About giving them a seat at the table. About honoring and protecting all of God's children.

The next time you see or read or hear something that makes you uncomfortable, stop a moment. Notice that feeling. Don't try to explain it away or rush to push it aside. Acknowledge it, and then take a breath and get curious.

It won't solve anything right away. But it might start to change you.

When I think about Jonah's story, I can't help but wonder what happened. What do you think? Did he stay hard-hearted? Did he walk away from a God whose forgiveness and mercy extended to people he abhorred? Did he head back into Ninevah and spend time with the people there?

We don't know. But maybe that's part of the lesson to be learned. After all, the book of Jonah ends with a question. It's one of only two books in the Bible that does. Like Jonah, we are left wrestling with the goodness of God, a

goodness that demands that we be God's grace to our enemies, that we care for the innocent, that we look past our own needs.

Friends, I don't know what you're feeling this morning as you see what's happening in the world. But if that cynical voice in your head is loud, if frustration and despair are strong, know this: God doesn't give up. God doesn't give up on the people on Ninevah, no matter what they have done. God doesn't give up on Jonah, no matter how far he has run. God doesn't give up on us, when our efforts fall short and our words ring hollow and cynicism hardens our hearts.

We may not see cynicism coming. But God sees us. And God promises mercy, forgiveness, and perspective that can restore our hope. Amen.

(Direct links to articles mentioned above: )

<https://agoodchristianwoman.blogspot.com/2020/06/paternalistic-racism-of-nice-white.html?fbclid=IwAR34DW0xTzwpN1MFVXnLNBwW92JMRm0yT966IBdBR32OnRKSO6Ri3c6Swk0&m=1>

[https://soletstalkabout.com/2020/05/28/how-to-respond-to-riots-never-solve-anything/?fbclid=IwAR0FLMbkpKx-mVqUOuLbjc9Jm\\_V\\_WAuYtAk16KavhJgEfeoWIV5qG3dyF4](https://soletstalkabout.com/2020/05/28/how-to-respond-to-riots-never-solve-anything/?fbclid=IwAR0FLMbkpKx-mVqUOuLbjc9Jm_V_WAuYtAk16KavhJgEfeoWIV5qG3dyF4)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/06/i-was-bad-guy-my-whiteness-meant-i-was-never-threat/>