

# Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

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The Third Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord  
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“And What You Have Is . . . Nineveh”

Text: 1 Corinthians 7:29, 31-32, selected

*“This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. . . . for the form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. . . . [I want you to be free] to please the Lord.”*

*“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:2).

No offense to our friends in “The Pelican State” - and with the admission that I’ve only “just passed through,” never spent any time there, and so only know what I know about it from what I’ve seen on television - but this is New Orleans on “arnolds,” Mardi Gras on “roids.” *This! Nineveh!* For if the whole notion of “Carnival season” leaves you a little unsettled, if the thought of Mardi Gras in particular makes you feel a little creepy, this is a hundred times worse.

*This! Nineveh!* Modern-day Mosul, Iraq.

Oh, but before I offend not just “the South,” but now much of “the Middle East,” *too* - having never been *there, either*, and only knowing what I know about *it* from *what I read in books* - I’m not talking the city itself. I’m talking about the city *within* the city; I’m talking about - and no offense to Las Vegas for even *linking* the two - “*Sin City*.”

Oh, but now wasn’t Nineveh where one of those “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World” - the “Hanging Gardens of Babylon” - was?

Indeed, it was.

And wasn’t Nineveh once “one of the most beautiful cities in the Near East, with its gardens, temples, and splendid palaces” (historian Gwendolyn Leick), not to mention great walls and public parks and gardens - all guaranteed a steady supply of water by a carefully planned and executed sophisticated series of canals and aqueducts?

Indeed, it was.

And didn’t Nineveh boast a famous library during the reign of Ashurbanipal (668-627 B. C.), whose more than 30,000 inscribed clay tablets (the books of that time) drew scholars and scribes to the city in great numbers and allowed for the development of the arts, sciences, and architecture?

Indeed, it did.

But as I said, that’s all just the city; and I’m not talking about the *city*. I’m talking about the city *within the city*; I’m talking about what went *on* there. And *that was sinful!*

Thomas Bolin, professor of theology and religious studies at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, calls Nineveh “a metaphor of the ambiguity of *all* cities” - where “the city . . . embodies the best and worst of human life: the mundane, dramatic, and tragic.” “Cities are morally ambivalent places,” he explains, “that hold out the promise of excitement and the threat of danger.” They are “at once sites of corruption and of great human achievements.” “In the Bible,” he notes, “the first murderer, Cain, is also the builder of the first city (Gen 4:17).”

So to Nineveh, then, as “Sin City.” And hold your nose or cover your eyes, if you have to!

Now, letting our neighbor-by-the-same-name to the west and north *today* sit this one *out*, you think “Sin City” *today*, and you might well think *Sodom*, right? Sodom and

Gomorrah. And you'd be *right* - at least in *part* - for there is a connection, a *theological* connection! It's back in Jonah chapter *one*. It's back at the *first* time the Lord send his reluctant prophet to Nineveh:

*"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me'"* (Jonah 1:1-2).

The Lord had caught a whiff of the stench coming from Nineveh, hadn't He? And that's exactly the same thing that had happened with Sodom - some ten or eleven centuries before.

*"Then the Lord said, 'The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me'"* (Gen. 18:20-21).

That stench contained a whiff of pride. For if you take all that wealth and accomplishment and power, and you add a cocky spirit, what you have is, well, what you have is . . . *Nineveh*.

Now, admittedly, there was no love lost between the Israelites and Nineveh in the seventh century B.C. Nineveh had long been an enemy of the people of God. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians had defeated the northern kingdom of *Israel*, destroying its capital, Samaria. And twenty years later, they very nearly nearly conquered Jerusalem, as well, the capital of *Judah*. But that doesn't change the fact that Nineveh was a city of violence, a city known for its brutal treatment of those it conquered. If you're looking for a city notorious for its ruthless military tactics, notorious for its cruelty to those it captures, notorious for amputating hands and feet, and gouging eyes, and skinning and impaling its captives - well, what you have is . . . Nineveh a city so idolatrous and so proud and so evil that the prophet Nahum devoted an entire book to it:

*"From you, Nineveh, has one come forth who plots evil against the Lord. . . . The Lord has given a command concerning you, Nineveh: 'I will destroy the images and idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile'"* (1:12, 14), he begins. *"Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder - no end to the prey!"* (3:1), he continues. *"Who has not felt your endless cruelty?"* (3:19), he concludes, in what is the very last verse of his book.

However, it wasn't just Israel, or Israel's God, it was Nineveh, too, or at least Nineveh's *king*. For - although it's in those verses the folks down at Lectionary Central apparently didn't want us to have this morning - the minute Jonah delivered his warning to Nineveh's king, the latter contritely issued a royal decree ordering the people to *"give up their evil ways and their violence"* (Jonah 3:8b).

The book of the prophet Jonah, too, reflects the evil of Nineveh, only without a lot of specifics. The city is described as being huge - taking three days to walk across - and thoroughly evil, but all the man of God really says about the Ninevites is that every one of them should *"turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands"* (Jonah 3:8).

Like I say, if you're looking for a place that's known for having been a great, and lawless, and ruined city, what you have is . . . Nineveh. Greek literary giants like Aristotle and Herodotus cataloged the city's sinfulness under its legendary last king, Sardanapalus. According to legend, when his subjects rebelled against his taboo sexual behaviors, the king mounded up all his wealth into a mountain, climbed on top of it - surrounded by all his eunuchs and his concubines - and torched it all with a fire that wound up burning his palace to the ground. And even the 1589 morality play *A Looking Glass for London and England* by Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene fills in some of the blanks in Jonah's vague depiction of Nineveh. It retells the story of Jonah, but

includes a lengthy description of Nineveh's sinfulness, complete with evil kings, usurers, demons, murderers, and forced incest (Thomas M. Bolin, "Nineveh as Sin City", n.p. [cited 20 Jan 2018]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/places/related-articles/nineveh-as-sin-city>).

So, if you're a prophet of the Most High God, and you're looking for a place you *don't* want to have to go, what you have is . . . Nineveh. Yes, pack a place with those who really deserve to get what's coming to them, who are a poor excuse for a human being, who really make your skin crawl, who make good godly people recoil in horror, and what you have is . . . Nineveh. Leather together a "hemelossely idole trous" people who, as pastor and seminary professor Bruce Shephard says, "travel, ineptly retaining in its wonted conceits to invent ever new ways of sinking into an ever more deplorable depravity" (apocryphal). Lesternary at Lurch (Apocryphal Seminary, St. Louis, MO, 2011, chapter 2), and what you have is Nineveh.

And what you have is . . . Jonah, as well, right? Nobody has to tell you, friend!

But somebody had to tell Jonah twice, didn't Somebody, the big Somebody, the Lord God Himself!

"When 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'" (3:1-2).

Yes, we missed that whole scene with the "great fish, didn't we, with the "three days and three nights" "in the belly of the great fish" (1: 17)? We missed the call to go to the last place on earth the prophet wanted to go, and Jonah running as fast and as far as he could in the opposite direction, and the great storm at sea, and being tossed overboard and swallowed by that great fish, and "Jonah pray[ing] to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish" (2:1), and "the Lord speak[ing] to the fish, and it vomit[ing] Jonah out upon the dry land (2:10), whereupon Jonah was told a second time to go the place God had sent him.

And this time, Jonah obeyed. Without hesitation. Without a fight.

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!"

It doesn't sound like much of a sermon, does it? He certainly doesn't sound like an early Billy Graham, does our Jonah? But clearly it was just what the people of Nineveh needed to hear. For "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" (v. 5).

And Jonah 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" (v. 10).

Mission accomplished. Nineveh eternally safe and sound.

And not a moment too soon.

Now, Jason (as you've heard me say before, is one of St. Mark's favorite words. He rather "immediately" for Mark, time is always at the essence, it's always running out. And this morning is no exception.

"Now right after John" - the Baptist - "was given up," Mark says, Jesus wasted no time. "Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (14-15).

Repent.

Of what?

Of what you've done?

Well, yes, but I'd say that since that question is left open, maybe Jesus has something else - something bigger - in mind. I'd say repent not just of what you *do*, but also of what you *are* - "a poor, miserable sinner," as we often con-

toss together. *Let your sin*, that is, *but also of your sinful*  
mass

Repent and believe

Oh, but notice, don't just believe *anything*. For the whole "believe" question is *not* left open here, is it?

"Believe in the gospel."

Believe that God, for Jesus' sake, forgives sinners. *All* sinners. *All repentant* sinners. Even those who make you feel a little creepy. Even those who leave you feeling maybe a little bit *more* than *unsettled*. Even those you think deserve to get what's coming to them, those who, frankly, are a poor excuse for a human being, those who really make your skin crawl, those who make all good, godly people recoil in horror. Even a shamelessly idolatrous people who revel, insatiably rejoicing in its wanton capacity to invent ever new ways of sinking into an ever more deplorable depravity.

Yes, believe in the gospel, brothers and sisters in Christ. Do not be "*ashamed*" of it, as St. Paul warns, but rather "*believe*" in it. Believe that indeed it *is*, as he assures us, "*the power of God for salvation to everyone* [emphasis added] *who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*" (Rom. 1:16).

Oh, and don't delay to share it with all those "sinners" as Jesus did, for even back in His time, Jesus Himself warned His followers, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*" (14-15). For what you have there, brother and sister Jonah - there in that cesspool of sinners - is . . . *Nineveh*. What you have there, brother and sister Jonah - there in that swirling sea of sinful humanity is . . . the city of *Nineveh*. And the "city's" time rapidly is running out!

The sea in Jesus' Galilean ministry is always a symbol of a world under the rule of the devil and his demons, a swirling sea from which good men and women must be "fished out," must be "caught," for His kingdom. And

quickly, before it's too late!

We "*fishers of men*" (Mk. 1:17) dare not delay, because the Lord God "*takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked,*" (Ezekiel 33:11), but rather desires "*that the wicked turn from his way and live.*" His will is that "*all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.*" And the truth is that "*there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all*" (1 Tim. 2:5).

We "*fishers of men*" (Mk. 1:17) dare not delay, because "*the night is coming, when no one can work*" (John 9:4).

We "*fishers of men*" (Mk. 1:17) dare not delay, because "*the time is fulfilled,*" "*the kingdom of God is at hand*" (Mark 1:15) in Jesus, God's own Son, through the power of His sanctifying Spirit.

St. Paul actually tells the young Corinthian Christians that "*the appointed time has grown very short*" (1 Cor. 7:29). Oh, it *sounds* like he's giving advice on marriage; but he's not. He's giving advice on living - living as a believer in Jesus Christ, living as a disciple of Jesus Christ - married *or* unmarried! And he affirms both the latter - being single (1-5) *and* being married (6-8) - neither is the issue for him here. The question is, single or married, not what is your relationship with the opposite sex, but rather what is your relationship with your Savior and Lord! "Whether we are married or single, mourning or rejoicing, buying or selling . . . the most important thing," Concordia Seminary professor David Schmitt explains, "is that we are in Christ." And that we use this life we've been given here in this world to lead us ever closer to Him, that we, like they, might have "*undivided devotion to the Lord.*"

May God indeed grant it, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.