

Ancient Cliff Notes
Jonah
December 9, 2018
Courage Church, Detroit, MI

We are in our series “Ancient Cliff Notes” - which I have really enjoyed.

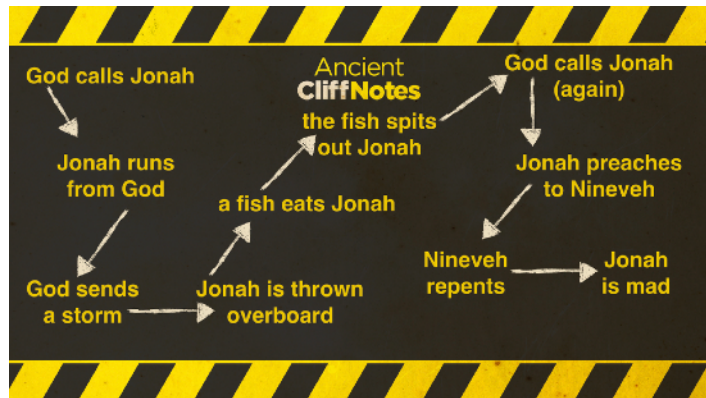
And what we are doing, is we are carefully selecting stories from the Old Testament, and we are giving one sermon on each story. So, unlike our typical series structure where we do a

chapter or book of the Bible and we do it line by line, this series is more of an overview of the story... and we are achieving our goal for it by answering these three questions:

- what happened then?
- what does it mean for us now?
- and how does it point to Jesus?

today we are going to look at one of our favorite stories in the Bible, and that is the book of Jonah.

Two years ago we did a whole series through the book of Jonah, so if you were here for that, obviously some of this will sound familiar to you though I am going to bring a couple things to the table that we haven't covered in the past.



Of course, if you are want to learn more about this story, this is one that we have tons of content we have put together on, and you can go on our website anytime and watch or listen to it.

I had mentioned earlier in this series, that originally I was planning to do this teaching in October so we could give it right before YOM KIPPUR. Obviously that didn't happen, but here is why we originally wanted to do it that way:

Yom Kippur is, in Jewish culture, the Holiest Day of the year. It is the day of atonement, a day that is talked about in Leviticus 16, where the high priest would slaughter one goat on behalf of the sins of the entire land, and he would take a second goat, called "Azazel" - which means "taken away" or "take him away" - and the priest would confess all of the sins of the people into that goat and then send it away into the wilderness, carrying the sins of the people to a remote place where it would never be seen again.

And in Jewish culture, between what happens with these two goats, the sin for the entire year is atoned, FOR EVERYONE. For you, for your neighbor, for the person that you DON'T WANT GOD TO FORGIVE because you are so mad at them... but that was the other thing about Yom Kippur... if you were a part of Israel, you were not allowed to hold something AGAINST someone else after Yom Kippur. You could not carry the previous years offenses into the clean slate that Yom Kippur offered everyone, every year.

To this day, it is a very important day in Jewish culture.

But, as odd as it may sound, every year on Yom Kippur, during their afternoon services, they read the book of Jonah IN ITS ENTIRETY...

From the Jewish perspective, Jonah's story is your story.

It is my story.

The story of someone who runs from the call of God, yet who God continues to pursue and never give up on and never revoke His call on your life.

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The book is fascinating, and we will cliff notes through it in a few minutes going pretty quickly... but Jesus actually made our jobs easy on this one...

because in our series we are constantly trying to find “how does this point to Jesus” - but this is one story that JESUS HIMSELF POINTS BACK TO, and straight up tells us “THIS POINTS TO ME.”

It happens in Matthew 12. The Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign... proof... evidence that He really is the Messiah. And this is what He says:

Matthew 12:38-41

“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For **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.** The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”

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Throughout our series on Ancient Cliff Notes, we have constantly returned to one of the most important themes in the entire Old Testament. It is the Hebrew word “*chesed*” - and is one of the most powerful and important descriptions that we get about God.

In fact, it is my belief that we should approach everything in life with this in mind. The word “*chesed*” is translated in some Bible’s as “loving kindness” and in other places “steadfast love” Love that holds on, and never ever lets you go. At the root of the word is the imagery of a mother swan that is plucking out her own feathers and then lining her nest so that her babies can rest in comfort.

Daniel Block says this in his commentary on Judges and Ruth, which I referenced when I was teaching on Ruth... because Ruth is a hugely important book as it relates to the concept of “*chesed*”

But in it, he says this about the word “*chesed*” - He says that there is NOT one word in English that could possibly do justice to this word... no one

word can describe what this word means because this word is a *covenant term*... wrapped up in this ONE WORD is ALL THE POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD.

The reason that it is so important that it is a covenant term, is because throughout the Old Testament, God makes and renews covenants with Israel, from Abraham to Moses and beyond... and part of the significance of the word "*chesed*" is not just that God is willing put himself through pain FOR YOU...but also that God is SO COMMITTED TO YOU, that He will be faithful... He will be loyal... He will do what He promised He would do on your behalf... NO MATTER IF YOU DO, OR NOT.

Now, the covenants, especially early on, seem to be focused on the people of Israel. How God obligates himself SPECIFICALLY TO THEM.

Remember when we talked about Hosea? God told Hosea that in order to speak for God, He first had to understand God. And to that do, Hosea had to marry a prostitute knowing that she would be unfaithful to him over and over... AND YET HOSEA WAS STILL FAITHFUL TO HER. That is, IN MY OPINION, the best picture we get in the Old Testament of the relationship between God and Israel. Israel deserved God to abandon her, and never come back. But God ALWAYS came back, because He made a promise.

chesed is a way to explain that unending, steadfast love that God seemed throughout the Old Testament to direct toward Israel.

But it is used *differently* in the book of Jonah.

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But before we get into HOW it is used in Jonah, first, we need to understand the story of Jonah. Lets Cliff Notes through this... and today we are going to REALLY cliff notes through it.

God calls Jonah to go and preach to the people on Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, in what is today Iraq.

And Assyria, during that time, was about the biggest enemy that Israel had.

And this was during a time in history, when the Assyrians were constantly attacking Israel. The book of Isaiah, Chronicles, and 2 Kings (15 & 18) records multiple accounts of the Assyrians **coming in, attacking, taking over, deporting people**, taking what they want from whoever they wanted.

The oppression was pretty indescribable, unmatched by anything that had come before...

But notice the way that the book begins, Jonah 1:2 says this, from God, to Jonah:

“Arise, go to Nineveh, *that great city*, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”

So the book begins by God acknowledging that Nineveh has done evil against God... but look at the first thing he says when he is describing Nineveh... He says: **THAT GREAT CITY**.

So the city that is essentially leading the charge on one of the most destructive attacks on the people of Israel, is being called out for their evil, yet it is still being described as **GREAT**.

It is the Hebrew word: גָּדוֹל “*gadowl*” and it means “loud, **LARGE**, **IMPORTANT**, and influential”

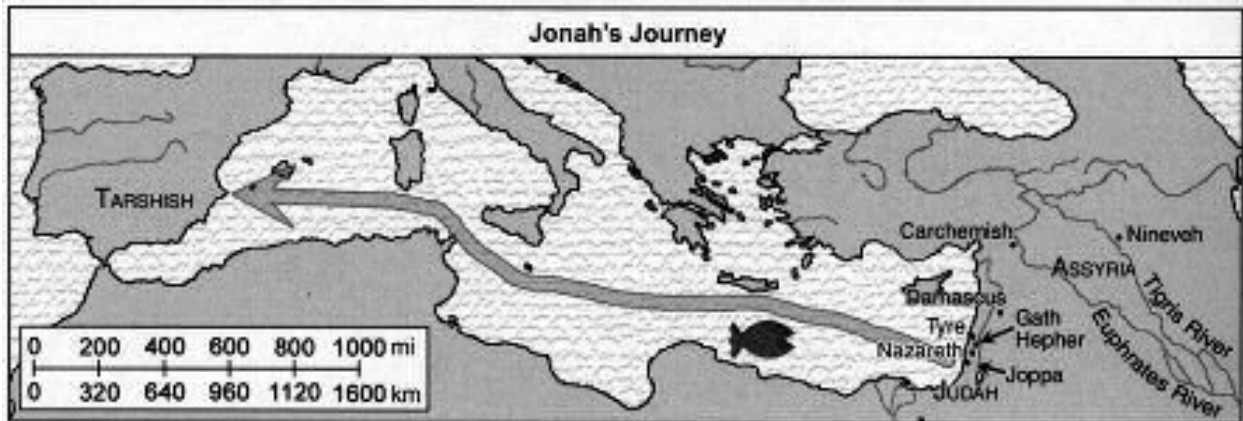
This is incredibly significant. Because the book of Jonah is the story of a prophet who is called by God to a **HUGE**, broken, sinful city...

who God still believed in.

Because it was a place of such influence, that He knew, if that city can change, it can change the world.

But Jonah does not want to go... and most of us grew up thinking it was because he was scared... but beyond that... he was angry. Nineveh was responsible for destruction against the people and places that Jonah loved, and he, in his humanity, did not want well for them.

So instead of going to Nineveh, he gets on a boat, heading toward a place called Tarshish.



Jonah started off in Joppa.

God calls him to this great city, Nineveh.
and instead, he goes to the port, and he jumps on a ship, heading for the place that is the farthest in the other direction that he could possibly go.

Tarshish. 2000 miles away at the bottom part of what we now know to be Spain. It was the very last city on the ancient maps... so, in this story, Jonah goes the furthest away place he knew to go.

So let me give you the basic cliff notes here.

God calls Jonah.

Jonah runs from God. He goes the other way.

Then we all know this part of the story... God sends a storm while Jonah is on a boat.

The sailors on the boat, throw Jonah overboard when he tells them that he is the reason for the storm.

Then, instead of letting Jonah drown in the ocean, God sends a big fish to swallow Jonah.

He eats him. But he doesn't chomp him up, he just swallows him whole.

Jonah sits in the belly of this fish for 3 days, he seems to have a change of heart....

The Fish spits out Jonah.

God calls Jonah, again. He says the same thing: (Jonah 3:2)

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”

So...

the fact that Jonah DISOBEYED God, and even ran the other direction, DID NOT CHANGE HIS CALL. Paul says it like this in Romans 11, “your gifts and calling are irrevocable!” - we all were at one time disobedient but yet we received MERCY... Because God has mercy ON US ALL. And that is what happened with Jonah. Mercy, that God would spare him from drowning...mercy, that his call was not taken away from him just because he disobeyed God and ran the other direction.

So God calls Jonah... again...

(and we go through this so much more in depth in our series on Jonah online...) but this time, Jonah goes and he preaches to Nineveh.

And this is where the story takes a very, very bizarre turn... at the preaching of Jonah:

Nineveh repents.

and chapter 3 ends by saying that when God saw that they had repented, he relented of the disaster that he was going to bring on them.

and if we could end the story right there, then the whole thing would have culminated at grace, Jonah would be the hero who overcame himself and his own selfishness to reach a city... and everyone lives happily ever after.

But the story doesn't end there.

Instead, Jonah gets mad at God for being so gracious, throws a temper tantrum, and in the end says he wants to die because Nineveh repented and a worm ate a plant that was providing shade for him.

Lets read chapter 4 together, a little at a time:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "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.

This is the *chesed* moment.

And it is a very crucial moment in the Bible. And here is why:

Jonah is an Israelite... part of the people who believed that they were God's chosen people...people who God himself had proposed to on Mount Sinai... who God has recklessly pursued even when they were unfaithful... God, each and every time going to extra mile to be reconciled with his people.

When God gave the ten commandments the second time, right after they had built the golden calf... God said these words (Exodus 34:6):

"The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..." abounding in *chesed*.

It was always a commitment to pursue His people even when they were unfaithful to him. But throughout history, Israel had this idea that it was only for them.

But Jonah must have had a realization... and quite frankly, it was a realization that HE DID NOT LIKE.

He realized that *chesed* was not only for Israel.

He said "God, I knew it!!!"

This is what you said you would do. This is why I went to Tarshish, because I knew that if I went to Nineveh, this would happen!" -

"I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and **abounding in steadfast love**, and relenting from disaster."

I knew that you are like a mother swan, plucking out her own feathers and lining the nest so that your young can rest in comfort.

I knew you would forgive these people who have done harm to Israel and I knew that your arms stretch farther than even we realized... I just knew it. Your mercy doesn't stop with Israel. I just knew it.

I knew that if they repented, you would spare them.

I knew that you would do anything for your children. I knew you were willing to come alongside of them in their struggles and in their pain and meet them in their messes, and make yourself hurt so that they can experience grace...

You see, the significance of this moment is beyond just God being merciful. This was a moment in which someone who KNEW God was on HIS SIDE came to the realization that God was also on the side of the people that HE HATED.

It is like that moment in Joshua 5... The Israelites were getting ready to march around Jericho, and Joshua looks up and sees what appeared to be a man who had drawn his sword and was holding it in his hand. And Joshua asks him, "Are you for us? Or are you for our enemies?" -

Are you for us? or against us?

Are you on our side, or theirs?

An either/or question... and this was the way that this “person” responded:

NO.

they said no. No, I am not on your side. and I am not on theirs. He said “neither.” - He said “I am the commander of the army of the Lord... and you, Joshua need to take off your shoes for you are standing on Holy Ground.”

So Joshua took off his shoes.

And I think that more important than figuring out if people are for us, or against us, if they are for God, or against Him... if we ourselves are even on the right side... I think more important than any of those things is realizing that we are standing on Holy Ground, right now. We are standing on soil in which God can do anything, ON BEHALF OF ANYONE, right now.

We get mighty surprised when God seems to bless people that we think that He should be cursing... but might I propose to you, that just like we talked about last week... God knows more than you know, sees more than you see, and holds the entire world in His hands.

And here on this earth, a place where SO MUCH IS BROKEN... the church is placed here to BE IN THE RECONCILIATION BUSINESS... not the business of standing in opposition to everything and everyone who believes something different than we do. We all need Jesus just as much as the next guy, and whatever He does IN US is just as much an ACT OF GRACE as it is if He decides to do it in someone else.

He can move in a mighty way on our behalf... and he can do the same for our neighbor. He can do the same for the people that we love, and he can even do that for the people that we DISAGREE WITH.

We are living in a city in which God may be moving in ways that are totally different than we ever imagined that he would... even working through people who we NEVER thought he could use.

That was Jonah. The dude didn't want Nineveh to repent because he didn't want them to be forgiven... because God working through Nineveh went against everything that Jonah thought He knew about God. To him, it felt personal... like God was against Jonah or even against Israel...

But to everyone else, it showed that when you are standing on Holy Ground, anything can turn around, FOR ANYBODY, at any time.

And the arms of *chesed* stretched beyond the world Jonah knew, and declared HOPE for everyone.

and suddenly, the work had been done in Nineveh...

but there was still work to be done in Jonah.

Because he is actually MAD that God saved Nineveh. Verse 3-5:

Therefore now, O Lord, please **take my life from me**, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.

He watched from outside of the city...somewhere with a view, and he watched, hoping that God would come to his senses and still destroy Nineveh.

verse 6:

"Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant."

Notice this. **Jonah was NOT exceedingly glad about being called to Nineveh. He wasn't exceedingly glad when the fish spit him up onto dry land and He got the calling again...** and He wasn't exceedingly glad when Nineveh repented at his sermon... he didn't give himself to the mission and let God be his comfort and his constant through his mission...

In fact, the opposite. He didn't even stay.

He preached. They repented. He throws a temper tantrum. The whole time he is mad.

the only time in the entire book of Jonah that we see the prophet happy, is when a plant comes and gives him shade that he can rest under.

The only time in the entire book of Jonah that our main character is happy **is when he is physically comfortable.**

It is not when he is serving. It is not when he is obeying. It is when he has retreated to his own little "safe space" **in a world that he does not have to interact with anyone or be anything to anyone...** and he can have his little day dreams **about bad things happening to people who had already repented.**

And of course, God doesn't let him stay in that for very long... the Bible says that God appoints a worm to come and attack the plant, and the sun beats down on Jonah's head and with the plant now withered Jonah asks God to just kill him... He says "it is better to live than to die" - and this is how God responds:

verse 9:

But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

We could do a sermon just on Jonah's anger, because in his case specifically, he was angry with what most in that day would consider to be a **RIGHTEOUS** anger.

He was angry because Assyria had caused substantial, real damage to Israel and now seemingly it would go without consequence. But his anger has distorted his view of God AND OF GRACE.

Grace is what we don't deserve, and the fact that God would show it even to a city like Nineveh should have been a sign of hope for Jonah... that God truly is abounding in steadfast love and will err on the side of grace when given the chance.

but **Jonah has a very distorted view of God**. He believes that God should pity his comfort but should destroy an entire city because of the things that they did EVEN AFTER THEY REPENTED.

God asks Jonah... "do you do well to be angry?"

he responds:

"Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

and **that sets God up for the finale**.

So, lets look at the way this book ends.

The book of Jonah ends with God asking Jonah a very interesting question...

"You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should not I pity Nineveh, that *great* city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much livestock?"

This is how the whole thing ends.

First of all, here we are at the end, and God is still using this word, "great." **Nineveh is not just any city**, it is "a great city." *an influential, important city*.

and I think that this is something that people tend to fly by:

There is something about cities, as far gone as some of them may seem, that God sees and says “that place is GREAT”

if you were to study the history of the early church and the way that it all spread, from the disciples to the missionaries that would follow, the majority of efforts to spread the gospel was always done in the city.

They went everywhere, but they focused the most effort on cities. It is where they sent the most resources, its where they sent the missionaries...

because **culture is shaped in the city.**

In the city, **you have thousands and thousands of people walking down the same streets every day**, you don't usually have as much nature and as much space, but what you do have are people.

A lot of them.

You can impact people anywhere. And we should be impacting people... But if you want to impact a **culture**, your best shot at doing that, is the city.

DID YOU KNOW... Nigeria in recent years **has sent more missionaries to major US cities**, than the United States has sent to Nigeria? The world is shifting, and more and more people are realizing that the major cities of the world are **the biggest mission fields of the world.**

Nineveh was a great city... it was by definition, both important and influential. Which means that whatever became of Nineveh was going to have an impact on the rest of the world.

If the name of God is pronounced there... it will be heard of everywhere.

That is why God is so adamant that the church be the ones rebuilding those places, because they are the centers of culture. I think that it is that way now more than ever.

Detroit is going to continue to grow and innovate and make impacts on our world and it is truly is going to go down in history as one of the greatest comeback stories of all time, and **when the church of Jesus Christ is front and center in that restoration**, then the gospel will move forward in so many ways that we could never imagine.

and it is no secret that the eyes of the world are on Detroit right now, and **as our city goes, so the rest of our state will go.**

God loves the city... because he loves people. And the city is FULL of people.

Look what he says: there are 120,000 people there, who don't know their right hand from their left...

He says, **you care about a plant because it made you comfortable?** Yet you expect that I would NOT have pity on 120,000 people who don't even realize what they are doing to themselves? They don't even realize what they are doing to each other?

Maybe if someone would go in there, and show them, **it would be different.**

How can I crush people who don't even know? They don't know what the love of God actually looks like.

and then he ends by saying: and much livestock...

and this is where we come back around, **to the beginning.**

To Yom Kippur.

To repentance.

To forgiveness.

livestock was the only system by which a person could move on with their lives, and never look back.

When you wanted to be forgiven, you would take an animal to the priest, and he would sacrifice it as an atonement for your sins.

and so God ends the book of Jonah by saying “you have pity on a dumb plant... because the fact that it withered has taken away your comfort...”

why should I, **a gracious and merciful God (who is LIKE a swan who plucks her own feathers out for the sake of her kids... who gives up her own comfort for the sake of her kids)** who is always on the side of *people... why would I **not*** have mercy on such an influential *world* city filled with more people than anywhere else, who don't even know what they are doing...

But the potential for **repentance** is everywhere in Nineveh.

Look at all that livestock.

All Jonah saw were pagans.
But all God saw was potential.

And all God see's when he sees Detroit, is potential.

and all God see's when he sees you, is potential.

Someone worth dying for.

That is why he sent Jesus! to meet you in the broken places... and **to settle the debt once and for all, so that we don't have to sacrifice goats anymore.**

There is this moment, right before Jesus was killed... Pilate brings before a crowd of Jews Jesus, and a man named Barabas... a murderer, the worst kind of criminal, and he tells the crowd that they can choose one man to spare - and the crowd says “we want you to free Barabas” - the murderer. We would rather have him wandering around, than this Jesus guy.

and so then Pilate asked the crowd “what shall we do with Jesus” - Pilate did not want to kill Jesus... He in his heart knew Jesus was innocent... but this is what the crowd shouted back:

take him away! take him away! crucify him!

The words take him away is the Hebrew word *azazel*... the name of the second goat on Yom Kippur, that carries the sins of all of the people AWAY, never to be heard from, again. And that is exactly what Jesus did for you, and for me...

and just like Jonah was in the belly of the fish for 3 days and 3 nights... after He died, after 3 days and 3 nights, Jesus Christ resurrected, proving once and for all that He is God. That He was not lying. That he really is WORTH following...

and proving once and for all, that God is *chesed*. Willing to shed his OWN BLOOD to keep the covenant... that He is abounding in steadfast love.

A person who died for his enemies. For people on the OTHER SIDE.

but unlike the Savior of the world that the book of Jonah ultimately points to, the main character in our short book... Jonah... has a very different view.

When you read the book of Jonah, you see a guy who wanted grace to fall on him, while judgment fell on his enemies.

He wanted “Yom Kippur” for himself, but he wanted “Sodom and Gomorrah” for them.

and if we are honest with ourselves, I think we often find ourselves there. God, you are so good to me... thank you for that... now could you just act swiftly in bringing justice on my enemies?

Not realizing that when we view people through that lens, we are living something that is very anti-christ. Just like Jonah. Because Jonah’s story is our story.

We all run from God. We all judge our neighbors. We all hide IN the comforts that are afforded us... **we all have moments when we think the goats were for us, but not for them...**

but The book of Jonah ends with a question.

Should I not pity?

and I think that we need to ask ourselves that same question today, Should I not pity?

Should I not err on the side of grace?

Should I not meet people right where they are?

Should I not believe in peoples potential?

Their potential for repentance? Their potential for change? Their potential to make something out of their life that nobody would have expected out of them?

will you commit to always find the potential in others?

With Christmas just ahead of us... will you commit to living a more compassionate life than you ever have before? Will you fight for the underdog this Christmas season?

Chesed is an amazing gift that was given to us... but its not just a gift we are meant to receive for ourselves and that is it... It was modeled for us so that we can live it out in our world.

God is trying to teach the world something through the life of Jonah. When you run... God chases. When you are faithless, He is faithful... But His love is meant to transform us and make us more and more like Him.

We never hear what ultimately becomes of Jonah. But I can tell you this... God's steadfast love did not run out on him... and it hasn't run out on our city.

Every person you meet is a child of God. Someone God was willing to lay down his own life for... someone He was willing to give everything for... God sees things in people that we just don't see... and my challenge to you today, as we leave this place and go out into our city, is to remember that every person we meet has a story... just like you and I have a story.

And in that story is pain... anger... bitterness... resentment... loss... love... hope... joy... faith... doubt...

all the things that all of us go through, that we tend to let define us.

But let's look past all of that... and see potential. Because that person is going somewhere amazing. God is using them in amazing ways. And this Christmas season, we have a chance to be a part in paving the path toward other people's stories.

If God can do it for Nineveh, He can do it for Detroit. And if God can use someone like Jonah to heal a city... then He definitely can use us. All it takes is someone who will say yes to believing in people's potential.