

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Lee Hanssen
Against the Tide: Jonah's Obedience
Jonah 3**

Good morning, everybody. My name is Lee Hanssen and I'm on staff here at CPC. I serve as director of Student Ministries. Many of you know (but some of you don't) that if I'm not here at CPC, you can usually find me on the back of a horse. I've been training and riding horses my entire life. I share that with you because that song just felt right, and also because about a year and a half ago I was at a rodeo in Arizona, and I met this beautiful woman named Hallie. This past winter I asked her to be my wife, and if I look a little extra smiley or have a little bit more pep in my step this morning, it is because in less than three weeks, she will become my wife. I wanted to share that with you. *(Slide shown.)* You can tell by the picture that I'm really marrying up, and I'm pretty excited about it. I wanted to informally introduce her to you, but I look forward to your actually meeting her when she comes and is with us and you can welcome her with warm hearts and welcome hands as I'm sure you will.

When I was in college I had a mentor, and he gave me a specific challenge. He gave me lots of challenges, but this one stuck with me for some reason. He said, "Lee, I'd love for you to spend a year in a Book of the Bible and allow that Book of the Bible to spend a year on you." I did that. I went through the Book of Hebrews and had an incredible journey through that Book. It changed me and became a piece of me. I love that we are in this series of Jonah and that for a whole month, we are just sitting in the very short four chapters of this incredibly rich Book in the Old Testament. I've seen God doing awesome things in my life, and I've been hearing stories of God doing awesome things in your lives. I get excited about it, and I hope you are excited. John Crosby [Pastor John Crosby] has been teasing me that I somehow got the good chapter. I don't know how that works. I'm going to talk about how Jonah went to a city and told them to repent or die, so John is just really sick or we just see things differently.

A couple of years ago I was in Eden Prairie, driving by the Eden Prairie mall. My brother and sister-in-law have a townhouse that's right across from the mall so naturally when I drove by, I thought of them. As I was driving, I sensed God asking me to turn my car around and go and pray for Rene. Well, Rene and Chris dated long distance. She was in California for most of their relationship, and I didn't know her all that well, and so this seemed kind of strange to me but I knew this was from God as it certainly wasn't from me. What you need to know is that Rene was pregnant at the time and had been having complications so she was on bed rest. As I pulled over and was processing whether I'm really, actually, going to turn around, God's request seemed to get a little bit more specific. It seemed as if God was saying to me not just, "I want you to turn around and go and knock on your sister-in-law's door and pray for her" but "I'd like you to lay your hands on her stomach and pray for her unborn child." I'm thinking, "God, You have got to be kidding me!" But in my heart, I really want to be obedient to God, and I don't want to ignore it when the Spirit prompts something in my heart, so I picked up the phone after a little

bit of time on the side of the road, when I could breathe again, and called Rene and made the request. I don't know exactly what she was thinking as the words came out of my mouth, but she said yes and I went over and did, in fact, lay my hands on her stomach and pray for my nephew, whom I now know as Ayden.

Why the story is relevant to us this morning, how that story relates to Jonah, is that I think God often gives His people a word. Sometimes I think God gives us a word that He would desire us to maybe, perhaps, even speak to somebody else. While my words that day happened to be a blessing and a warm fuzzy moment, what do we do when God gives us a hard word? How would we respond if God might call us into a relationship or a scenario or a situation where we would have to say something really difficult to somebody? I tend to be a little more truthful and blunt, so often when I've tried to enter into these conversations, I've been left feeling a little bit like maybe not everything that comes into my mind needs to actually come out of my mouth. Have you ever felt that way? As I think about that story about Rene and I think about Jonah and the Ninevites, it stuck out to me that sometime God is going to ask us to be the one speaking that truth. Sometimes God is going to ask us to be His messenger.

We are going to talk about that, but I also want to talk about what happens when we are on the other side of that story. What do we do and how do we respond when someone comes into our lives and speaks a hard truth to us, whether it is about a habitual sin pattern or a destructive behavior that is seeping in and leaking out to everyone around us. I really believe that if we are going to be the Body of Jesus Christ, if we are going to be God's hands and feet and we want to love people the way that Jesus did, we have to be willing to engage with people in this way.

A prominent Christian psychologist, Dr. Henry Cloud, says that people are God's Plan A. I believe that we are here because we really want to be more like Jesus, and if we want to be more like Jesus, I believe we have a place in this story. I'd love for you to open up the Bibles in the pew. It's page 1,382 if you want to read along, otherwise it will be on the screen. Jonah had a hard message. Jonah had a really difficult message. You know that he didn't just say, "Yeah, God I'm in." He kicked and he screamed, but eventually he went. So we find ourselves in Jonah, chapter 3, and the story goes,

1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: **2** "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." **3** Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. **4** Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

How would you like to be the one preaching that message?

5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. **6** When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. **7** Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. **8** But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. **9** Who knows?"

I love that. "Who knows?"

God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." **10** When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Now picture this story, and picture the conversations that you may feel like you have been called into or are being called into and how daunting it might feel to have a conversation with one or two people. Jonah went to a city so big, so large that it took him three days to walk through it, with a really tough message. One thing about this story that is interesting to me and that I think must be our starting place has to be where we are operating out of in this specific conversation of speaking and receiving hard truth. It is a very simple idea but very profound, that God has standards. We serve a holy God who has a better way of life for us and that same God that has these standards. He says that we all fall short. If we all fall short, how many is *all*? That's everybody! It's important to understand that because if we don't understand that we all fall short, if we don't understand that we all have sin in our lives, we are not going to understand if someone calls us out on it. We are not going to be the types of people who are alert to see the sin and brokenness in the world and respond to it. So before we can go any farther, we have to acknowledge that we are broken, sinful people and that that is okay. I don't applaud it. I'm not excited about it, but it's just our reality.

John Crosby shared last week that human brokenness leads to pain and that pain has consequences. He also shared that the storms that we go through in life, we don't go through alone and if these things are true, then our pain and our consequences don't just affect us. It leaks out into our relationships, our families, our workplaces, and even our church. Paul says to the Ephesian church, "I want you to speak the truth in love so that we might grow up into the fullness of Christ." Not to speak the truth so that you can prove a point or call someone else out on something but to speak the truth in love so that we might actually grow up into mature, functioning Christians just like Jesus. I don't know about you, but that is what I want and that is what I want for you. So I want to start with something that might make you feel a little uncomfortable, and I'm totally okay with that. I want everyone to raise their right hand. Raise your hand, there you go, and repeat after me, *I fall short*.

(All:) I fall short.

And I am broken.

(All:) And I am broken.

See, it wasn't so bad, was it? The people in Nineveh, oddly enough, seemed to understand that they, indeed, did fall short and that they, indeed, were broken. A commentator I love to read, Bob Deffinbaugh, says this.

It is particularly interesting to note that there was apparently no need for the people to be told what their wicked ways were. Of course, Jonah could have filled in the details for the people, but it seems as though no one needed any such clarification. The issue, then, was not one of having inadequate knowledge of what God considered sin, but lacking the desire to abstain from it.

Regardless of what these people were engaged in or how they behaved, they understood that they were broken, and they understood that they fell short. And you know what the beauty of our brokenness is? It is that we don't have to be afraid of it. We don't have to hide from it. We don't have to hide from our sin because that's exactly why Jesus came. And if you are in Christ, if you have submitted your life to Jesus Christ and you call Him your Lord and your Savior, He has paid for the messiest, ugliest, most broken areas of your life. His desire is to redeem and renew and give you a new life, so we don't have to be afraid of our brokenness. We can embrace it and we can embrace what Jesus wants to do in our lives. We can change, but we need each other to do that. God uses Jonah, a broken man, in his brokenness, to bring hope to a very broken and dying world. Jonah didn't necessarily do it with a joyful heart or a great attitude, but he went anyway.

I want to address specifically both sides of that coin and ask the question, what does it look like, or maybe a better question is, what should it look like, to be on the speaking end of truth and repentance? What does that look like and how do we do that? Well, when I look at Jonah, I think of a couple things. While I don't want us to duplicate his process, I do want us to learn from it. I think a couple of things that were very clear to me as I read the story were that Jonah had a very clear word from God. He had a very clear message for a very specific people. And also, he went through a process to get ready. Again, I don't applaud his process, but there was a process. Jonah took time to get ready, to be in this environment where he was going to be speaking these words.

I want to make a clarification that I'm not talking about being a pastor or a preacher. This isn't just John's job or Brad's [Pastor Brad Jackson's] job or my job, but as I read this story and ask how it interacts with our lives, I want to look at the author's original intent, why he wrote this passage. I believe it is two-fold. I think the author really wanted us to understand that God requires repentance from His people, that God requires repentance from all of us. And the second half of this big idea in the original intent of this passage is, I think is pretty clear that God's Word is what changes people's lives.

God's Word changes people's lives, and He wants us all to repent. I want to pass that on to 2013 because for most of us the context isn't going to be standing up here speaking to an audience. The context of these conversations most often will be between you and someone in your life whom you love and care about. Maybe it's your kids. Maybe it's your parents. Maybe it's your coworkers or your wife or your boss. Whoever it is, that is probably who you are going to be called into having a conversation with. So how do we do that? How do we say, "This way leads to death," with the heart of God not wanting people to die but wanting people to experience life?

I think we often have negative connotations and bad tastes in our mouths from how these conversations have happened to us in the past. I love how a very successful athletic clothing company called Lululemon has branded the idea of having hard conversations. Lululemon says, "We are willing to have the real conversation." I love that, being willing to have *the real conversation*. "Let's talk about *what's really going on*."

I think why these conversations have such a negative connotation in our lives is because people are really, really big in our world, and God is small. Sometimes we care more often about the ramifications of a conversation about our job or our career than we do about telling the truth. We are more afraid of hurting someone's feelings than we are about actually loving them well. We

are afraid that people are going to separate themselves from us. Or sometimes we are afraid to appear judgmental because we have seen the church wound people with zealousness in the Name of Christ, proclaiming a message and it's like seeing someone get sucker punched. Whichever camp you fall into, for whatever reason it's hard for you, I want to repackage that idea of "Let's just have the real conversation." It doesn't have to be a bad or scary thing. It can be an awesome, beautiful, wonderful thing that brings life. I don't have an A-B-C process, which is kind of funny because I do have three points, but they are more of a guideline for you of how we can do this well.

What does it look like and how should it look to be on the speaking end of truth and repentance? I think the first thing that is important is that **there needs to be an element of time involved**. If it really seems clear to you that you've been given a word or you feel like you need to have a conversation with someone and you feel like you need to have it right now, I would argue that you probably don't and you probably shouldn't. And in that space that you create, however long that might be, whether it be minutes, weeks, months, maybe even years, in that space you've created, I would ask you to really try your best to discern God's voice. Separate God's voice from your voice because often for me, my life screams a lot louder than His. You do that by having earnest conversations, and you pray and you open up God's Word. You might have to seek out a mentor, an older Godly man or woman in your life who can give you wisdom. Whatever that process is, I think there needs to be an element of time.

I think there also needs to be **an element of relationship**. Most people aren't going to be called to go speak a message to a stranger or a hard truth to someone they have never met or don't know. You might, but that's probably not what God calls most of us into. What happens when you are in a relationship with someone is, you get to know them and get to understand their story. At that point, you may not excuse their behavior but you might understand why they are so defensive, that they had parents who screamed at them their whole lives to be perfect and so they become despondent about any flaw. Or you might understand that someone who struggles so deeply with alcoholism comes from a long line of alcoholism. It doesn't excuse their behavior but allows you a different way to enter into the conversation. Have a relationship and earn the right to speak into someone's life.

The last thing might be the hardest thing, especially when we go with these hard truths. It is conversation. **Take time to listen to the other person and ask questions**. Listen! Notice I didn't say the word *hear* because I hear a lot of things, but listening is very different and I think you know the difference.

Just a couple of weeks ago I was in my office and I was sitting with one of my staff members. It was just the two of us in the office, and I said, "Brooke [Brooke Toftoy, co-director of High School Ministries], would you by any chance be willing to give me some feedback? You know, Cory [Cory Gregory, co-director of Student Ministries] and I, we've been in this role, doing things together for a couple of months now, and I just want to know how that feels to you. You know, what's going on? I'd love to hear it." Brooke didn't have a lot to say in that moment, which is okay, but later on that night, I got a text from her. She said, "Lee, I *would* really like to give you some feedback. I'd like to take you up on that offer. And Matt [Matt Moberg, co-director of High School Ministries] would like to come, too." Matt and Brooke work closely in High School Ministries so it was very appropriate for them to come together and offer me some feedback because it is a very intertwined department. I didn't know it but what I was about to walk into with Brooke and Matt was one of the most difficult conversations of my adult life. I was about to

have one of the hardest conversations I've ever had to sit across a table and have, but I want to share it with you because it is important that you see how this can be done well.

Brooke and Matt took a couple days, actually three days between the conversation and when we sat down. They had a couple pages of feedback typed out for me, so they had well-thought out thoughts. They had process, and they had prayed over this document. They set up a time and a space for the meeting so it didn't happen on a whim. When they came over to my apartment, Brooke and Matt prayed and we invited Jesus into that space. Then before they moved any farther, they stopped and affirmed me. They said, "Lee, we want you to know that we think you have done a lot of things really, really well this year. We love you and we care about you, but we also need to share some areas where we just really feel like you have really, kind of dropped the ball." They talked about ways that maybe I wasn't as present for them in their ministry area and where they didn't feel very supported by me this year. And then they talked some about my personality. They said that sometimes I come across really strong in meetings, and sometimes I say things that hurt their feelings or make them feel like I am trying to exert some gross authority over them. While it was never in my heart, it was never my desire, to do any of those things, the fact was that it was real and that it happened, and I just needed to own it.

I share that process because it was done so well. Two people who desired more than anything to see me grow up into the fullness of Christ loved me enough to speak the truth that I needed to hear into my life and have the real conversation. I applaud them for their courage, and I am so grateful. While it was one of the most difficult conversations in my adult professional life, I promise you, it will also be one of the most fruitful. I will be a better team leader. I will love your kids and these students better, and I will walk with Jesus differently because Brooke and Matt loved me enough to have the real conversation.

When I think about that story, I think about the other side of this coin. **What does it look like when we are called on to receive?** How do we place ourselves in those scenarios and what do we do when someone speaks those truths into our lives? I had a choice in that conversation. I could have become defensive and could have made a lot of excuses. I could have pointed my finger and changed the conversation around and told them ways that they screwed up this year, but that wouldn't have been Christ in me. So I stopped and didn't respond right away and took some time and processed. We met a week later and we had a great conversation. We got on the same page and things are good with us now. But I had a choice. I could have become angry and despondent or I could let this conversation have its place in my story and allow Jesus to do what He would want to do in me and Brooke and Matt through it.

When I look at the Ninevites, as I said, they understood that they were broken and had fallen short. When Jonah spoke this hard truth to them, they received it, they listened and then they changed. And so I have a process that could be helpful that I think we, too, can go through when we are on the other side, when someone is speaking a hard truth into our lives. **I think we need to humble ourselves to listen.**

The second thing is, if we need to, **take some time to process.** Often I feel like conversations are both urgent and important and that means they need to happen right now, and I need to respond and give you answers. I don't think that's true. I don't think it's helpful in conversations like this, and so I would encourage you, if you find yourself in this scenario, to be a good listener

in that process and take time to process and ask questions and pray. Ask clarifying questions, whatever you need to ask. You don't need to give an answer right away.

That grabs the most important and perhaps the hardest step: to actually **ask God the question what He might want to do in you?** "God, what might You want to do in my life? I have all these things that I have just received and they are difficult and they are hard, but where do they fit? I am certain that there is another piece of this puzzle." Brad reminded us a couple of weeks ago when he spoke about Jonah, chapter 1, of the simple and beautiful truth that God still speaks. God still speaks to His people, and I believe if we earnestly place ourselves in an environment where we ask God the question, "What might You want to do in me?" that He will answer.

We don't need to be afraid to own our areas of brokenness and sin because Jesus has already paid the penalty for us. That is what the Gospel is all about, restoration and redemption and becoming mature Christians who think and act and operate and speak like Jesus Christ himself. But we can't do that alone. We need each other. People are God's Plan A.

As I look at this story of Jonah and the Ninevites, it is a story of redemption. As I look at this story of God's heart, I love that we have a God who desires more than anything not to pay us back but to win us back. It is interesting to me that no matter which position we find ourselves in, whether we are being called to speak or to receive, God is essentially asking the same thing of us. He is asking us to respond to His Word. That's it! Whether you are speaking or receiving, God is simply asking you to respond to His Word in your life. That is what changes people and that is what makes us like Jesus.

So my hope for us is that we would be the types of people who are willing to have the real conversations, conversations with the heart of God that says, "This way leads to death but there is a better way." And my hope is that we would be the types of people who allow hard truths into the broken places of our lives and have the courage to let Jesus redeem, restore, reclaim, and renew so that we might be bearers and bringers of good news and life everywhere we go. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.