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**December 4, 2011**



**SEND YOURSELF TO THE NATION(S):  
SEND C.O.D.**

**Jim Wood, Senior Pastor**

Our lesson today comes in two parts: one in the Old Testament from the prophet Jonah ; the other in the third chapter of the gospel of John. And it is building on what our experiment is in this Advent season; the experiment to be able to be sent to the nations. We will talk about what we are calling the 2% challenge in a few minutes. In that light let's look at the third chapter of the book of Jonah in the Old Testament. Jonah is a short book. I would encourage you to read the whole thing.

Jonah, pretty hard headed and thick, it is probably the nicest way to put it. But God uses him and God works through him; Jonah slowly but surely gets it. We are not going to spend too much time talking about Jonah today.

We are going to be talking about what God did through him in one particular setting. God sends Jonah after he frees him from the belly of this huge fish, God sends him to a city known as Nineveh. You are going to hear that. Nineveh is a huge city in the seventh century. About the time we believe that is the historical context for Jonah. It was expanded by Sennacherib, the Assyrian ruler in the seventh century B.C. So big was it that writers, outside of our tradition, but ancient writers, said that it was up to 60 miles across.

This is a huge city that he built. We are told in our text today that it is a three day walk to go just across the city. It is in modern day Iraq, not far from the city of Mosul. So we actually have a number of folks connected to our congregation that have, in today's world, have actually been there. It was destroyed not long after Sennacherib. But it is also important for us to realize that the city was actually built - we are told in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Genesis by a man named Nimrod. Nimrod built it.

The other thing that Nimrod built in this city of Nineveh is he was responsible for or with the people the construction of the Tower of Babel. So imagine, God sends Jonah, a Hebrew, to a foreign city where there is very likely very few Jews there. There are some but it is overwhelmingly populated by others. Mostly people caught up in the fertility calls. Caught up into some debaucherous things as we would understand it. To go to a city that actually we would say is responsible for the fall of the world.

I mean in a sense, when the tower was built we all had one language, the entire world was built and God said oh, they are claiming too much for themselves. They are trying to claim themselves rather than me. So then all these different languages and all these tribes are created. So it is the creation of the tribal system. And God sends Jonah there. Of all places, no wonder Jonah would be kind of irritated about it.

### *Jonah 3:1-10*

*The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' 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. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

*When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 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. 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. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'*

*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.*

Now, in the New Testament, the Gospel of John, the third chapter; a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night. Nicodemus is a Pharisee; he is obviously very influential. He is a leader. He shows up two other times later in the gospel. He is not a believer but he is curious, perhaps. He wants to know more. He comes to Jesus in the middle of the night and you will notice in the Gospel of John as you read through the Gospel of John that dark and light; darkness and light, it is a theme that permeates throughout. And so great symbolism that Nicodemus comes in the middle of the night. It is as if he doesn't want anybody to see him.

And so when you read in the passage and when you hear it today it is going to be very clear that Jesus is not only giving us a huge statement; a cosmic statement. He is also saying something specifically to Nicodemus about the time of the day that Nicodemus comes to visit him. Now what I find intriguing about the story of Nicodemus is that Nicodemus, even though he is the leader; he is in Jerusalem; he has great influence and affluence; he is really a foil almost in the Gospel of John.

Because I believe that the story of Nicodemus is placed where it is so that the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John will take on more power. And look later at that fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. It is the story of a woman, a Samaritan woman, at the well. And Nicodemus comes at night. Nicodemus comes as part of the religious authority, part of the religion of Jesus. He doesn't get it. But the Samaritan, who really is of another faith in essence, is a woman who has no influence and affluence. She comes to the well in the middle of the day because that is the time she is not around others. She gets it.

So, it is really, really interesting when you look at how John; how God worked through John to form this Gospel in this shape. Now Nicodemus has already heard from Jesus that you have to be born from above. Now the word can be translated either way. Born from above or born again. Jesus I believe, means born from above because he is talking about things above and things below. Nicodemus understands it as being literal. Being born again. And so Jesus talks about that to him. Now the conversation continues. Listen again for the word of our Lord.

### *John 3:9-21*

*Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*

*'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'*

*'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'*

*'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want to begin by telling you that I believe in His majesty. I have seen it. I have witnessed it. I have encountered it. The majesty that comes to us even though we are sinful men and women. The majesty that promises that in the Kingdom of God all things will be right. The majesty that brings meaning in the midst of apparently meaningless existence outside of God. I have been in a season thinking a lot about memory; partly because I am having less of it.

But I have been thinking a lot about memory. I actually love Augustan who talked about memory as a way of understanding God and the godhead. I am always reminded of a story of a woman who was asked if she believed in the hereafter. She said of course I do and

the person talking to her asked well how do you know you believe in the hereafter. She said every time I go into a room, she is an older woman, she said every time I go into a room I look around and I wonder what I came in here after. It is funny what we do remember. It is funny what we remember.

Do you ever have things that you can go back and remember exactly? You can smell it, taste it, see it, feel it. I mean it is as if you can go back and find that moment. I had that happen to me this week. A moment that happened to me in the fall of 2002. At a middle school gym in Norfolk, Virginia. The memory of something that happened at that middle school gym became vivid for me. So vivid that I could tell you the color of the walls. I could tell you the cracks in the naugahyde on which I kind of sat. I can tell you everything about it. I tell you why.

It is a story of a, it is when our middle son, Adam was wrestling at Blair Middle School. He was in the seventh grade himself. We went to his match and I was in a neighboring middle school in Norfolk. Kind of an old beat up gym. There was a guy that was on the wrestling team with Adam that was just; of all the athletes I've seen in my life was probably one of the most, naturally gifted athletes I've ever known. His name was Leon Thornton. Leon was a kid that had a, he just was, he was undefeated. He won every single match and he never made it past the first round. He would pin somebody within the first 45 seconds to a minute. I mean every single time. I mean it was an amazing thing. I mean he was this natural athlete.

And, Leon did it in a way that drove the other coaches crazy. So much that the coaches would actually complain about him. Because he did it with a huge smile on his face throughout the entire match. He always had this huge smile. The other coaches would actually complain because they would say this kid is goading, he is trying to intimidate, he is trying to be, that is just not good sportsmanship. The coach for Blair would say no you don't understand. That is the

only expression this kid has. He just smiles all the time. And it was true. Leon, every time you would see Leon there was this huge smile on his face. On this particular day in fall of 2002, when Leon was in the seventh grade, he won his match within about 30 to 45 seconds. After the meet was over, right at the end, the opposing coach came up and starting talking to our coach. What he was doing was, he had a kid on his team that was a special needs kid. The kid didn't, wasn't able to walk very well, and had a series of limitations. But, they would let the kid dress up, put the wrestling singlet on.

The coach came and said would you have someone wrestle this kid. And so the coach immediately called Leon. Undefeated and Leon's huge smile. They helped the kid get over to the mat and Leon wrestles him. Goes the first round, goes into the second round and there almost at the end of the second round Leon was pinned by the special needs kid. Of course Leon threw it. Always with a huge smile on his face, even to the very end when he was pinned. He got up and he had a bigger smile. He is one of the reasons I remember that story so vividly.

I saw the same smile of Leon Thornton one morning this week about 6:15 with our own Kerri Furey on the WAVY 10 News when they showed a picture of Leon with his huge smile to say that Leon had been murdered. 23 years old. Leon had been in the Army, he had gone and lived not far from Nineveh , Mosul. He is in the National Guard now. I read a couple of days later in the paper that it was a home invasion they believe. People coming in to rob as he was shot and they were standing over him.

Witnesses said that they called him by name. Leon spent a lot of time at our house, growing up. I know that we, for right or wrong, we have tried hard to with our family to live a kind of family diversity that enabled and encouraged different backgrounds and kinds of kids to be around. But Leon is the third kid who spent time at our house, who has been murdered. I don't know what will happen with

Leon's case but I know that the other two are still unsolved. Is it because nobody knows; absolutely not. It is because we all know and we talked about it last week; Seth Godin talks about all the tribes in which we live. It is because there is a tribe that says snitches get stitches. There is an inner city tribe that says that the police and the hospital and the judiciary and all authority is not to be trusted or respected. We look at that and think it just doesn't make any sense.

It would just be so much better if we were able to put all these resources behind and serve and yet this tribe says that the images of someone in uniform standing over and pepper spraying people is what they believe is the reality for their life. Now, please I am in no way, I mean I am overwhelming supportive of our police and our judiciary. I mean, they are heroes of mine. I am just talking about an understanding that one tribe says and believes and to which they live. I want to say this that I don't understand that, but I shouldn't, I couldn't, because I am just a drive through observer.

You see my tribe is different. My tribe is secluded. Neighborhoods in which my tribe chooses to live or desires to live has lots of protection, security, the things that we do. The trust that we place in certain areas all kind of based on my tribe. Here is my thing: how many tribes are there and what do they mean and how do we live into them? Are we in a sense almost at the back end of a Babel city, that has so many different tribes that there is no communication and conversation amongst us.

And the thing that troubles me the most is that you see these tribes actually teach us to distrust each other. To distrust the other tribes whether it be a gang that you are in or whether it be the tribe that we are in. Who do we trust and who do we distrust? I had it happen to me. I was in Trenton, New Jersey about 1 in the morning one time. I had a member of our congregation that was very ill. The hospital called me and wanted me to come immediately and so I went to Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in Trenton.

If you know anything about Trenton you know what a bombed out area it was at that point in many ways. And so I go to - it is a risky place sometimes, and I get there about 1 in the morning. I get on the elevator and I'm ready to close the door, I'm going up to the eighth floor or something. The door starts to close and then I see a hand reach and stop the elevator. And then I realize that it is this huge black hand. And he pushes the elevator open and he comes in and he gets in the elevator. When he gets in the elevator, it is a big elevator, he gets in and he stands like pretty close to me. And the big black hand was attached to a big black guy.

We started going up and the elevator started making rattles and I'm thinking this is like an eternity. Finally he looks over at me and says, be honest, you are scared ain't you. I said, yes, sir. He looked at me and said so am I. He ain't going to hurt me is he? True story. Exact words. Turned out he was a Ph.D. from Harvard and was Baptist preacher who is still one of my dear friends today. I met him on that elevator. He loved me into realizing, helping me realize that as much as I want to be open, as much as I, we all have our tribes.

We even have dogs that bark at people in other tribes. It is interesting because as we think about it, but it is true everywhere. When I go to Kenya the dogs always bark at me; the white guy. They go crazy. I actually had a friend, another true story, a friend when the dogs starting barking at me I said it is kind of interesting that the dog is barking at me and nobody else. The guy looked at me and said well, all I can say is that our dogs like to eat the white meat on the chicken. True story. Later I thought I think he is talking metaphorically.

You see, we do, we have our own tribes, and we are taught you see we now live in a culture that says that they don't exist but we know they do. And we are taught and so we come to the story of Nineveh and we think of all these tribes. I mean you can't build a city that is sixty miles across.

You can't build a city like that without all these different tribes that are coming together. Here is the point of the story, that is why Nineveh has its name. Because of the Tower of Babel; it is known for its diversity. It is known for all this; it is known for a ruler that would oppress the people as he builds it. All of that is going on. But, here is the meaningful part for me in this passage in this story today. When Jonah goes to Nineveh he doesn't really want to go; he doesn't why would he want to help them? But he does, and he does what

God says and here is what it says. It says and the people of Nineveh believed God. Now remember they didn't know God. I mean this isn't their God. I mean they had their own gods. They had their own fertility cults. They had their own different things. They came from all these different nationalities and ethnicities and religions and all. But it says and the people of Nineveh believed God. And they proclaimed a fast and everyone great and small put on sackcloth. The king, he humbles himself. He takes off his kingly robes and puts on sackcloth and ashes.

And then the king says, "Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways, from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows, God may relent and change his mind. He may turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish." And that is exactly what God did. God, we are told, changed His mind. Of what He had said and of what He had planned on doing to Nineveh. And, it happened because all those tribes came together in one confession and one repentance.

I wonder today what would happen if all the tribes could unite and just for a moment under one banner. A banner of confession and repentance. A banner that says it is up to me to look for some responsibility in all that takes place in my own society. Even in the tribes of others. What would happen if all the tribes could unite under one banner of confession and repentance.

And what if we as a people of God took a hard look at our own tribe. And wondered if perhaps we are not more like Nicodemus and the dark then we want to admit. Oh we come and we believe and yet we come here and we make sure that we go out and live in a way that no one really knows that we come here because that might make us not fit in. Or we might seem as judgmental or whatever that may be. And what if we took the challenge that Jesus offered to Nicodemus and said you know you have a choice. You can look up or you can look down. You have a choice of darkness or light.

And what he was saying to Nicodemus is the same thing that he is saying to us. He is calling us to live in the frontier between what is above and what is below. To bring the light of God to a place where darkness might be. Now here is why I think it is such a challenge for us. Because what we do; I am going to go from preaching to meddling because it just burns in my heart. Here is what I think we do and I feel responsible for this. I am not, this is me.

I think we have created a church in America that sees itself as a place of safety and security. I think that that safety and security is shaped much more by us being a tribe who live with safety and security as a primary cause and desire than anything else. I think we say that this is a safe place to come. I think that is why sometimes we are frustrated and we are troubled when people get up and start talking about hard things or things of the world that we just don't want to hear. Or we don't want our children to be exposed and all of those things I think we; I think what we have done is we've taken the Gospel and we have said this is a place this is the Gospel that is supposed to come and make us safe.

It is a place where we really should not have to talk about all those things. Those are troubling things we don't know what to do with them. Let's come here. Sing the praises to the majesty of God. And do all of those things and so what we have done we have created this identity that to be a Christian to be a believer of Christ, to be a church

goer; to be all of that is to live what, and I know it is a little anarcharistist but I think we all get it. To live as a Cosby family. It is as you know come, and everything is nice and everything is orderly and everything just is right. And it all kind of makes sense, it just all that kind of it is the Cosby family. But what happens when the world out there enters into that family?

I shared with you last week about an experience I had as a kid. It was a one-time violent encounter. I also shared with you that I have never said that in public. I said hi to my mom; my mom is 92; I said I have got some explaining to do because I have never told my mom what happened to me when I was 8 years old. Ever. My sister's watching; I never told her. Why wouldn't I tell her about a violent act with a counselor one time. Because, I felt responsible.

Now here is why I felt responsible. Not for what happened to me but you see the "Leave It to Beaver" family; the Cosby family; it's just all so good. You do your part and it all comes out and everybody is happy. It is black and white but it is still like a colorful life and of all that is. And if I had come and shared something about that brokenness I would have been responsible. I would have been responsible for that family no longer acting like it was the Cosbys. I don't know if it makes any sense to you but for some of you I know it does.

I want to go to really meddling right now because I really feel - raise your children and protect and guard them as best you can. But always leave the conversation open about the pain that happens in the world. So that if, God forbid, something ever enters into their world, something ever creeps into their life; something ever creeps into their existence, they won't be ashamed to share that with you and seek the wholeness that God wants for them in their life.

Don't let your love, your guardianship, your protectorship, don't let it hurt their life. I promise you, it can. So what if we saw ourselves as a tribe that loved and cared and protected and guarded as best we could, but still sent ourselves to Nineveh. To the frontier. Looking upward with the message of Christ.

Looking upward with the promise of Christ, John 3:16. Jesus. "For God so loved the world that He gave only son." And the thing for me, you see this is what it is about Christ for me. This is why Christ means so much to me – because on the cross, Christ didn't die; Jesus didn't die to change God's mind. He died to express God's mind.

He died to show us, the love that the Father has and the restoration and the wholeness and the fullness of life that the Father has for us. And yes, we have to believe in hereafter in order to claim it in its fullness but there is something about that promise that brings meaning to our lives today. And so that is what we are called to be as a people, as a tribe, that goes to the frontier. That goes to that edge between darkness and light and shares something of the promises of God.

Sheryl did that in a simple way this week. I think it is something that only a mother I really mean this, I think only a mother can do. What Sheryl went and she got a bunch of chicken, mac and cheese, all kinds of stuff and she took this huge amount of food to Leon Thornton's mom. You know we have a, we have names in our language for someone who has lost a husband or a wife. We call them a widow or widower.

We have names for someone who has lost a mother or a father, we call them an orphan. So deep is the pain for someone who has lost a child that we don't even have a word in our language for it.

And so Sheryl went and just sat with the mom who at this moment is wondering if she can put enough money together for the obituary let alone for a funeral. Thinking about things that a mom of a 23 year old shouldn't have to think.

And the truth is in a few years; Leon's mom is not going to remember at all what Sheryl brought. But I guarantee you she will remember that she went. And that that visit was in some way a way of looking upward. What if we looked upward and lived and gave as if all of these were our own children. They were our own brother or own mother or our own father. Our small group is doing a book Radical. It is pretty radical.

We spent a lot of time talking about the same things. Here is basically what we do – we talk about the fact that we know we should do more. And then we say how much more should we do? How do you know how much is enough is enough? Well, we don't really know. We get into all this conversation. I think we do know. I think we ask the wrong question. I think the question still is how much is enough but this is the real question.

If I saw if I saw this child; if I saw this situation; if I saw this person as my own child there is no question in my mind that every single one of you here, if you had a child that was struggling with cancer; if you had a parent, a brother or a sister who is struggling with a potentially fatal illness you would do anything. You would mortgage your house in a heartbeat. What if I lived as if every child around the face of this earth in some way that they were mine? It was my brother. It was my mom, it was my dad.

You see if I did that here is what the biggest challenge would be. The challenge would be a question of how much it wouldn't be how much would I give. The question would be how much would I hold back on which to live? I'd be filled with such an overwhelming generosity you see that is what we are talking about.

Just in this being sent to the nations. This 2 % challenge. We are simply saying just go seven days on a trip. Or a 168 hours in service this year to go and sit and listen and talk and do. Three hours a week. I mean it is something that is minimal and yet it is something that gets us going. It gets us moving. It gets us being sent. What if we lived that way? What if we took that experiment; what would it do for us?

You see we all want a life of significance. We all want to have a life that matters. And yet it is so important for us to realize that the life that really matters is the life of Jesus. The significance of Jesus' life is offering his life as a sacrifice for us to have life. Jesus is the one who went to the frontier who brought the light into the darkness. This is who we are.

So I go all the way back and I think, I think you know one way to look at it, what do I do about this kid that I knew who was hanging out at my house all the time. One way to look at it is to say it is just another senseless death. Which in all honesty is another way almost of saying it is just another senseless life. I can make sure that the locks are tight on my house. But when I look up I see that Leon Thornton's life mattered because I can tell you the feeling of the cracks in the naugahyde as I sat there and watched an undefeated seventh grader with a huge smile on his face go 2 rounds with a special needs kid and finally, losing the match.

And I can tell you that the smile on that little boy who won was even bigger than Leon's. I think that matters. It matters when the light of God shines into this world and to its darkness and so I believe in the hereafter. I believe that there will be a day when Jesus comes and sets all things right.

I believe that there will be a day when all tears will be wiped away when the promises of God will be offered to us eternal. I believe and I live for that day.

But I also believe that the word of God says to me that I should be doing something about bringing here and now. And so the question for me and the question for you is where will we go? Where is the frontier in our life? Where is that place where we have something of light that might shine in the darkness so that the darkness will not overcome it?

I'd love for you to be able to look at those challenges. To be able to say I want to take that 2 % challenge. The second is simply to say I want to shine the light of prayer on a site in Nineveh someplace that is God calling me to shine some kind of a light of hope and wholeness. And who is it that I can invite to come and say you know come and just experience a bunch of broken people seeking wholeness and seeking living into what we believe God's promising us to do.

Please pray with me. Father, I thank you, I don't really know what else to say Lord. Here I am. I pray for my people. I pray for those who mourn. I pray that your light will shine. I pray that your light will shine. Lord, overwhelm me with the joy that comes in following you. In the powerful name of Jesus, amen.