

Reading Schedule for March 27 – April 2, 2017

Our reading for this New Year has been inspiring to me, and I hope it has been for you as well. We will wrap up our reading in Exodus and spend four days in Jonah. Exodus was about the Passover and God's deliverance, just like Jesus would be our deliverer. In the Book of Jonah, the prophet is in the whale for three days and the sign of Christ is that he would be in the grave for three days. I am also inspired by Jonah because he let fear and his distaste for the Ninevites to keep him from doing ministry. This story is a challenge to us. On Saturday, we will begin 16 days leading up to Easter, reading a chapter in the Gospel of Mark every day. It will take longer to read these chapters, but it will be well worth it as we prepare our hearts for Easter.

March 27 – Exodus 20:1-21: "You shall have no other gods before me." (v.3) This begins several commands about our relationship with God, concluding with the Sabbath rest. I have always been inspired by this one command, that there should be no other gods before my allegiance to the one true God, because there are many things that can take the place of God in our lives. This is the very first commandment. All the others fall into place when God is first. You know the greatest command – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart. . . ." Today, there are many things that can become gods to us. Money, fame, work or pleasure can become gods when we concentrate too much on them for personal satisfaction or security. No one sets out to intentionally worship these things, so ask yourself, "Is there anything that is taking the place of God in my life?" How do you respond to these Ten Commandments?

March 28 – Jonah 1: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai. . ." (v.1) This sets the whole story in motion. The next verse has Jonah running away from the Lord. Nineveh was a wicked city. We know from the prophet Nahum that they plotted evil against God, exploited the helpless, and were filled with idolatry, prostitution and witchcraft. Jonah was either afraid of this city, or totally disgusted with these wicked people. What is God asking you to do that you're reluctant because of fear or distaste . . . you lack God's love for them?

March 29 – Jonah 2: "But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'" (v.9) This is an interesting prayer. It is not what I would expect from a man in the belly of a whale. He doesn't specifically ask God to deliver him. It's almost as if he knows that he deserves this punishment, and that he is just grateful to be alive. There is a very strong message in this story that shows us God doesn't just let us run away without trying to get our attention. Jonah was disobedient, but God would remain faithful and concerned by intervening in a very dramatic way. Jonah understands that he had not followed through with God's call on his life, and he vows to make it right. He might have just had worldly sorrow for being in the belly of the whale, but he actually displayed repentance. He does what God asks him to do. We will read that tomorrow. What do you appreciate in this prayer? How might you pray a similar prayer, and for what reason?

March 30 – Jonah 3-: "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." (v.10) This may be the most surprising part of the story. Nineveh's wickedness was very great. However, they were open to God's message and repented immediately, following the King's example. I believe the stories in the Bible are to assure us that

people will respond. We get in the mindset that people don't want God. Many hearts are hard to him, but there are many others that are just needing to hear the truth that is demonstrated through our love for them. You know God to be a God of mercy and compassion. God forgave Nineveh; he is always ready to show compassion to anyone willing to seek him. Isn't that an amazing truth about the character of God? I appreciate that because I need that as well. How is this story inspiring you? What do you learn from this chapter?

March 31 – Jonah 4: "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (v.11) The story ends rather abruptly. Obviously it is meant to leave you thinking. We see the stark difference between Jonah and God. God feels compassion for the sinners; we often want to judge. May this story reignite your heart for ministry. The possibilities are very exciting. There are many people who live apart from God in our city. Less than 1 in 3 profess Jesus Christ as their Savior in Salem/Keizer. On a Sunday, there are only 1 out of 10 people worshiping God in a Christian church. The need for ministry, compassion and courage is as significant today as it was when Jonah was called to go to Nineveh. As the Lord fills your heart up with his amazing love and grace, may your cup overflow and spill into the lives of those around you. How do you respond to this story?

April 1 – Mark 1: "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (v.8) Jesus would come to us as the Deliverer and save us from our sins through his sacrificial death and the power of the resurrection. But already, John is forecasting that Jesus would be the sender of the Holy Spirit. He is telling us that through a relationship with Jesus Christ we would have his very presence in our lives. That means that the power of God is available and present to transform us into the likeness of Christ. Jesus not only came to offer us forgiveness of sins, but the power to live for him. As I read through this chapter, I was reminded about this mighty tool in my life called the Holy Spirit. Of all the weapons the Lord has given me to live in victory, none is more significant than the presence of his life in my soul. Be filled with the Holy Spirit, friends! How do you respond to this first chapter of introduction? Why?

April 2 – Mark 2: "On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" (v.17) This statement actually reminds me of one of the beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God." Poor in spirit essentially means someone who realizes his need for God. Someone who is so-called righteous doesn't realize their need for God. The Pharisees thought they were righteous, but they didn't realize their need for God. Jesus spent time with those who wanted to hear his message. I have found that people who go through hard things by their own failure, such as divorce, are more open to the Lord. They realize their need for God's help and healing. God has called us to be people of compassion, where we assist others on the road to healing. This is what Jesus did, and we will too. How do you respond to this second chapter of Mark?

Prayers: Pray for our journey to Easter. These are very important days. God has ministered deeply to people as they have set aside time during Lent to seek him in special ways. Pray for spiritual renewal in our lives during this special season.