

# Communion Service

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[ 0 : 00 ] The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell.

It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell. O love of God, how rich and pure, how measureless and strong. It shall forevermore endure the saints and angels' song.

It is one of the greatest joys a preacher can ever have, to preach on the love of God. That's our theme, our topic this morning, and maybe that is not automatically obvious given what we've just read from Jonah chapter 3.

Look at verse 4. On the first day Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overturned. Do you remember chapter 1 verse 2?

Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me. Isn't Jonah's message that judgment is coming? Judgment.

[ 1 : 11 ] Yes, this is a prophet now showing at last, like he was meant to. Here is Jonah showing that wayward sinners are in the hands of an angry God.

And, and, and, oh the love of God here. Woven through these verses in chapter 3.

Woven through them like a golden thread. The love of God is greater fire. I want to try and show you that this morning in four ways from chapter 3.

I want to let Jonah 3 this morning get you to leave here and do four things. I want you to leave this morning counting, seeing, wanting, and loving.

Here's the first thing to do this morning. Number one, count like God counts. Learn to count like God counts.

[ 2 : 15 ] Last night as we looked at chapter 2, I said that many of God's people spend a lifetime, we can all do it, spending a lifetime with no idea just how merciful God is.

And when we see how God counts, when we see what God is like with numbers, we get just one more glimpse of that mercy.

Look at chapter 3, verse 2. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. A second time.

Oh, friends, just pause with that number. Remember the beauty of it. A second time. Chapter 1, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee from Tarshish, from the presence of the Lord. And as he ran, the Lord turned his back and folded his arms and bolted all the locks and blocked Jonah's number and closed his account and brought down his fist and said, Enough.

[ 3 : 33 ] You've blown it. You're finished. Is that what God did? Let me ask you this morning, do you believe in second chances?

Do you like second chances? We all tend to like them, don't we, when it's us who needs them? What do you like at giving them?

The exasperated parent tears through the house. I've had enough of this. I'm sick and tired of, well, I don't know what it is in your house.

Things getting broken around here. I've had enough. No more. See, the book of Jonah, as you look at it there in front of you, whether it's on a screen or in a book in your hands, if you look at it, it is a book of two halves, two parallel halves.

Chapters 1 and 2 is the salvation of Jonah. Chapters 3 and 4 is the salvation of Nineveh. So in the first half of the book, God is preparing Jonah for what he is about to witness in the second half.

[ 4 : 41 ] Before God gives Nineveh a second chance, he gives Jonah a second chance. And Jonah is meant to be so amazed that God has been kind to him that he's overjoyed that God might be merciful to them.

Well, he's meant to be. This means that second chances are all over this book. The sailors get a second chance. Jonah gets another chance.

Nineveh gets another chance. God loves giving his people and his world one more opportunity, one more time, one more moment, when we get to see what we should have seen earlier and when we finally get round to doing what we should have done at first.

Christian people often end up debating, don't they, how old the earth is. I don't know if you've ever had that kind of argument. Is it 6,000 years or whatever or millions of years?

In fact, actually, the Bible is less interested in how old the earth is than in what God has been doing, however old the earth is.

[ 5 : 57 ] What has God been doing? He has been giving thousands and thousands and thousands of years of second chances. 2 Peter, the Lord is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Friends, it could be that you just need to hear that this morning. Do you need a second chance, a fresh start?

God can give it to you. Maybe you've come from the kind of environment where there were no second chances. One strike and you're out. A father who you couldn't please, whatever you did. A mother whose hopes you just didn't measure up to and you know it and you live with it. Maybe you're here in midlife and there just seems to be wreckage behind you and here you are kind of blinking, wondering, how did I ever end up like this?

Get to this point. With God, friends, with the Lord Jesus Christ, tomorrow can hold a second chance. Maybe you just need to hear that more than anything else this weekend.

[ 7 : 17 ] You haven't blown it in your first year at university. You haven't blown it in a way that you can never put right. Don't believe that lie. You haven't wrecked everything by finding yourself here in Aberdeen, in this city where you never thought you'd be.

Right in front of us here, in front of me, in front of you this morning, here is a table that speaks to us, doesn't it, to say God gives second chances.

Maybe this morning you know it's not you, but a person in your life. Is there someone you need to give a second chance to? Do you love counting like God counts when it's your sin, but for someone else's sin, well, we kind of get stuck on number one, don't we?

Someone else? Well, come on, you don't know what they've done to me. Let me just sit here and cherish my small horizons, please.

Chapter 4 this evening. Well, it turns out it is a very bitter pill to swallow, to see somebody you hate being given a second chance, a very bitter pill to swallow.

[ 8 : 38 ] Is that you? It's easy to say the words of the Lord's Prayer, isn't it? Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us, but, well, those words come out easy, but second chances get stuck in our throat.

Is that me? Oh, friends, the love of God is greater far. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, to Jonah a second time.

You are not a waste of space, Jonah. Your ministry is not finished. God is so gracious to us while we press pause on what we should have been doing all along and what Jonah should have done first time, he now gets to do second time.

So, number one, count like God counts. Number two, this morning, see what God sees. See what God sees. What does God see here? Nineveh.

Go to Nineveh, the great city of Nineveh. God sees the Ninevehs of the world, the great cities, the truly significant places of influence and power, the cultural capitals, the Silicon Valleys, the oil-rich places of the world.

[ 10 : 04 ] God sees them. Nineveh is called great in this book at least four times.

And Nineveh was great in three different ways. First of all, it was great in size. You see that in verse three? Nineveh was a very important city.

A visit required three days, great in size. It may not have been literally a three-day walk from one end to the other. It's possible that these three days here, a visit requiring three days, it's possible that this refers to an ancient practice of hospitality whereby the first day in a great city was given to arrival and formal welcome.

Day two, you did your business and day three, a formal closing ceremony, you left again. But you didn't do this three-day kind of thing if you just visited the little homestead down the road.

No, you did it if you visited a city like Nineveh. It was a major diplomatic, military, economic center of the ancient world. It was a three-day visit kind of city.

[ 11 : 24 ] That's the point. It is not so big that parts of it escape God's attention. No, He sees it.

The Lord who made the sea and the dry land sees every place, in every time, in every age. Nineveh was great in size and significance, but look, secondly, Nineveh was great in lostness.

Great in lostness. Look at chapter 4, verse 11. God is speaking to Jonah, but Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.

Amazing statement, isn't it? In a city? Cities, the place of the greatest innovations, the places of the greatest symbols of art and culture and progress, places where we have people who can send a man to the moon, and yet God says they cannot tell their right hand from their left as they look down.

They don't know who they are. It's a way of saying, isn't it, these people don't know night from day, black from white. They don't know good from evil.

[ 12 : 46 ] Isn't that our cities? Isn't that this city? All our cities. We can get oil out from beneath the North Sea.

We can do that, but we can no longer look at our own male and female bodies and say what is true about them. Male and female are becoming outlawed words.

Transgender. Trans race. You maybe saw the case in the news not long ago. Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who self-identifies as a black woman.

Trans speciesism. Children, men, women, feeling they've been born, not just in the wrong gender, but born in the wrong species. A woman convinced she's a cat.

A man convinced he's a dog. Why? Because we're lost. Make no mistake, friends.

[ 13 : 54 ] Make no mistake. God's people never, ever mock individuals like that. Never mock them. For how does God respond? With compassion.

But it is compassion for lostness. Take your pick from any of our pressing moral issues. Take your pick from any of the greatest cities on earth.

We can reach the sky, can't we? We can conquer it all. And we are doing it in the dark where we cannot tell right from left. We cannot tell right from wrong.

We call what is evil free choice. We call what is beautiful ugly. Think about it. Why is bacteria on Mars counted as evidence of life on other planets, but a heartbeat in the womb is not counted as life on earth?

It's because we cannot tell our right hand from our left. We're lost. Great in size. Great in lostness.

[ 15 : 02 ] But there's something else. It's also, thirdly, great in evil. It's clear, isn't it? Chapter 1, verse 2. Call out against Nineveh because its wickedness has come up before me.

Nineveh was known as a kind of ancient version 2 of the great city of Sodom. The warlord of Assyria would often cut off the noses of those who they captured in war.

Women and children were brutalized in appalling ways at the hands of the Ninevites. Again and again throughout the Bible. Assyria, the nation who had Nineveh as its capital, Assyria in the Bible becomes a kind of byword for violence and destruction.

The blood flowed in Nineveh's streets. It flowed freely and it flowed often. You see evidence of this in our text, don't we?

Chapter 3, verse 8. The king says, Let the people give up their evil ways and their violence. In cities, like nowhere else, people scramble over each other like caterpillars in a jar.

[ 16 : 16 ] And the city contains great evil. Violence. The forceful infringement of human rights. God sees all of it.

All of it. The size of it. The lostness of it. The evil of it. Is seen by God. Their evil has come up before me.

So because of this, chapter 3, verse 4. Judgment is coming. Judgment is coming.

Friends, when you read those words in verse 4, On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed, Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned. When you read those words, Do you know and do you believe that the love of God is greater far?

For all that is seen in this world by God, all that he sees, is seen by a God of holy love. Verse 4 are words of love, aren't they?

[ 17 : 34 ] Beautiful love. Forty more days. There's love. There's patience. You have time.

Not one more second chance, but forty days of countless second chances. But look, too, forty more days, and this will be overthrown.

It will be stopped. That's love, too, isn't it? One day it will end. Oh, we need to know.

We must know. That judgment is loving. It is right. It is beautiful. Did you ever see that program on TV, The World's Strictest Parents?

What makes it great TV is that they start by showing you the opposite kind of parents. Kids swilling vodka, kids swilling vodka, smoking pot, swearing at the parents, while the parents just keep dishing out ten-pound notes to them, and doing nothing about their behavior.

[ 18 : 49 ] No one watches that, do they, and calls it love. No one. Where there is no discipline, there is no love.

The opposite of love is not hate, it's not anger. The opposite of love is indifference, apathy. The shrug of the shoulders, you decide what's right and wrong, I'll fall in line behind you.

How hateful that is. But when someone looks at that and says, this must stop, that's love. How loving.

The message to a lost world that this will not go on forever, that judgment is coming. Oh, it is an act of love, of holy love. It is a message of judgment that comes from a heart of love and compassion deeper and wider than we can ever imagine.

And so what does God want? Count like God counts. See what God sees. Number three, want what God wants. Learn to want what God wants.

[ 20 : 05 ] What does he want as you look at chapter three? Judgment. Does he cherish the overthrow of Nineveh and delight in it and finally get to say, at last, just what I've been waiting for?

No, what God wants is what happens here. Repentance. Repentance is what God wants. The Ninevites believed God.

Verse five, they declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 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.

Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles. Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything. Do not let them eat or drink, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth.

Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.

[ 21 : 22 ] That's repentance. Do you remember the prodigal son in Luke chapter 15? There's that lovely phrase, when he came to himself. When he came, before he went home, he came home to himself.

When he came to his senses, when he looked in the mirror and saw himself for who he really truly was. What God wants is for men and women, from the greatest of them to the least, to recognize that they are what is wrong with the world.

And when they recognize it and turn from it, that is repentance. Seeing who I am and doing an about turn on the spot and running to the Lord Jesus Christ, that is repentance.

I want you just to look at the picture of repentance that emerges from these verses. There are four things about it. Repentance is saying what is true about you, number one.

Repentance is saying what is true about you. Look what the king does. Rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

[ 22 : 48 ] See, repentance is removing all the cultural badges of acceptance, all the symbols that we use and put on us and put on us to perform well in front of other people.

All the ways we elevate ourselves. Repentance is a, well, it's a, a derobing of all our titles, all our offices, all our privileges and coming to God as we are.

Over the weekend, as I've met several of you, quickly in the conversation, I ask you, so what do you do? The answer comes back, I'm a such and such, I'm a so and so.

Repentance means you lay all those things at the door. You come to God, not as sir or doctor or accountant or nurse or student.

We come to God as a human being before the Creator God. Isn't that what's happening in verse 6? It's what the king does. He de-kings himself, doesn't he?

[ 23 : 54 ] He abdicates. He swaps the regalia for the reality. He sits in ashes. See, repentance is saying to God, however much respect is attracted to me in my role and my place in society, oh God,

you know me.

You know me. Naked I entered this world and naked I will leave it. And every single day of my life, you know the truth about me. Repentance is recognizing what is true about me.

And that is that I am not worthy of all the things that attach to me. I will go back to my Father and say, I am not worthy to be called your son.

Repentance is saying what is true about us, but repentance is also saying what is true about us vertically. Look at verse 5. The Ninevites believed God.

Isn't that interesting? Who is speaking? Jonah. Jonah's preaching, but it is God they're responding to. It's a beautiful detail in the passage.

[ 25 : 08 ] It's not Jonah they've offended, but God. It's not me or David you need to respond to today or your elders.

I don't need your sermon feedback, but God does. It is His world we've vandalized. It's His image we're defacing with our selfishness.

Repentance is saying what is true about us vertically. Number three, repentance is saying what is true about us horizontally. Horizontally.

Look at verse 8 again. Look what the king says. Let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

See, if I get the vertical wrong, if I get my relationship with God wrong, then I walk in evil ways.

Screw God, then next on my list is screw you.

[ 26 : 18 ] Violence is in our hands, isn't it? Repentance is saying what is true in this realm of all our relationships. We maim each other and wound each other and spoil and soil.

Isn't that right? Sin is always, always two-directional. It is up to God and out to you. Repentance says out loud the truth of that.

I will go back to my father and say to him, I have sinned against heaven and against you. Have you ever done this?

Can I ask you that this morning? Have you ever repented? Have you ever had that deep, abiding, distressing sense that chapter 1 verse 2 is true of you?

Wickedness coming up to God. We tend to make peace with sin, don't we? Find ways of negotiating with it.

[ 27 : 30 ] We cut corners, we learn to live with it, we dilute it, we dial it down, we find a rug to sweep it under and God never, ever does.

Sin is abhorrent to God. Many, many years ago, over 20 years ago when I was a young man, I lived in Ivory Coast in West Africa for a year teaching in a school.

Every Friday afternoon we played football and the temperature must have often been in the high 30s, sometimes in the 40, 40 degrees Celsius in the heat and the sun and an hour of football you can well imagine you leave the football pitch literally soaking wet in sweat, every single part of you, whatever you're wearing.

And on one occasion one of the boys from this school left the football pitch like all the rest of us covered in sweat, went back into the dormitory, it was a boarding school, went back into the dormitory where he lived, took off his t-shirt and lobbed it up on top of a wardrobe.

So, it's what teenage boys do, isn't it? And the boys lived with it in their dorm for a week, in two weeks and then the smell began to rise and rise and it became a school crisis.

[ 28 : 48 ] Is there a blocked pipe somewhere? Has an animal died somewhere under the bed? And the smell was rising and rising and the boy had taken it and chucked it away into a corner, forget about it.

The stench came up before the parents, the dorm parents who loved the boys, who cared about it, cared enough about them to not leave them in the stench.

It was abhorrent to them. They found the truth in the room, they found the truth about the boy.

We've all got sweaty t-shirts, haven't we?

We chuck off into the corner, we just ignore and it rises up to God. Do you want what God wants? God wants us to see the truth about Him. He wants us to see the truth about ourselves. He wants us to act out in our lives our behaviors that we want to turn from our sin.

[ 30 : 01 ] Do you remember Martin Luther's famous words, when our Lord and Master said repent, He intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance. The entire life.

Here's the last thing to notice about repentance. Repentance is acting out what is true. Acting out what is true. We're going to act it out in a moment at a table, eating, drinking. Repentance has body language. It takes real concrete form. Repentance means a real change. It's not an idea in the head that you think about it, it's something that you do. Do you notice that here in the text?

Verse 7, repentance means a fast. It means sackcloth and ashes. The body is abased. Isn't it amazing? And so are the cows in the field. Can you imagine that? The cows covered in sackcloth. This is another place, you know, I was saying this last night, this is another place, Verse 8, man and beast covered in sackcloth.

[ 31 : 14 ] This is another place where many people say, of course, look, this is just a parable, can't literally be true, the book of Jonah. What a sight. That would have been a cow literally wearing sackcloth.

As if we do not know what it is like to treat our animals exactly the way we treat ourselves. Isn't that right? All over the world in different cultures, we treat our animals as we do our own bodies. Pampered people have pampered pets. Lazy people have lazy pets. What do we do in all our moments of greatest pomp, greatest national significance and splendor?

We do the same things. We dress our animals. Horses at royal weddings, parading up the mall. Here is a moment of national shame, national mourning, national repentance.

repentance. Why is it strange to us? Wasn't that long ago that horses pulled hearses, dressed in black? Now, I think our raised eyebrows at verse 8 have less to do with what we think of animals and more to do with how little we think our bodies are part of our repentance.

[ 32 : 34 ] Words, yes, but actions, surely not. It's why in many churches where there is a prayer of confession for sin, there are cushions on the floor to kneel.

Oh, the humiliation, the awkwardness of getting off my seat to kneel in front of you and to say sorry to God and to them in repentance.

Repentance is an equalizer, isn't it? From the greatest to the least. I love that phrase at the end of verse 5, from the greatest to the least. They put on sackcloth the Armani coats, super dry coats, fat face coats, all left at the door, all dressed the same.

Brothers and sisters, there are things to change when we repent. There are things to stop doing when we repent. There are things to start doing when we repent. Let me just give you a number of things that repentance will mean for all of us.

There are some things it will mean for all of us and there are some things it might mean for some of us. Here's what's true for all of us this morning. Repentance means that we love what is true about God.

[ 34 : 05 ] We love His holy love. We acknowledge out loud what is true about us, that we are fallen and sinful. Repentance means we will be honest with God and with ourselves about ourselves.

Repentance will make you a humble person. repentance will make you quick to admit wrongs. Husbands, do you know that?

If that's you this morning, your role as husband is to be quick to admit wrongdoing, to be the head, to be the lead repenter in your family.

Repentance means we will be listening to God's Word, examining our own heart. repentance means we will greet the confessions of others when they confess to us. We will greet their confessions with joy and forgiveness and understanding.

And for all of us, repentance means letting go. It means turning, verse 8, turning from certain things. for some of us this morning, repentance might mean a change in a relationship.

[ 35 : 20 ] A relationship where we know we've harmed and brought pain to someone. For some of us, repentance will mean a second chance for somebody we think we can never forgive.

For some of us this morning, our saying sorry to God might mean we have to go from here and say sorry to somebody else. Repentance might mean a change in your sex life.

You're involved sexually with someone who is not your husband or your wife. Repentance might mean a change in what you read or watch or where you go.

Might mean a change in your ambitions most of all for you know that deep down you are seeking a throne with no thought of God or Christ. And so I want to finish with this.

One last thing. Repentance will mean for all of us that we return to God by running to Christ. I want to invite you to run to the Lord Jesus Christ this morning.

[ 36 : 36 ] I'm just about finished. Here's the last one. Number four. Love what God loves. Count like God counts. See what God sees. Want what God wants.

Number four. Love what God loves. Verse 10. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.

This book here is to get us to love what God loves. He loves mercy. He loves it. Mercy spills out of God.

Spills out of Him quickly but well what does chapter 4 say verse 2 mercy comes quickly and anger comes slowly.

Wouldn't you love to be like that? I find as a parent it's the opposite. Anger comes quickly. Mercy and compassion slowly. God is the opposite.

[ 37 : 41 ] He cannot wait to lavish it and pour it and to spend it and to give it again and again and again. Some of us this morning need this like we need water in a desert, don't we?

maybe you're here after years of running from God, years of it and ignoring His word and you're looking back over the wreckage of your life, decisions you've made, people you've hurt and the fingerprints of recklessness are all over the place.

Lives are broken, children are hurt, parents are perplexed and here we are inside a churchy world where people's lives all seem to be in order and things happen in order and right on cue and we wonder, we secretly wonder if Jesus can really be for someone like me.

Listen to J.C. Ryle. Do we feel bad and wicked and guilty and deserving of God's anger? Is the remembrance of our past lives bitter to us?

Does the recollection of our past conduct make us ashamed? Then we are the very people who ought to run to Christ just as we are, making no useless delay.

[ 39 : 07 ] Christ will receive us graciously, pardon us freely, and give us eternal life, for Christ receives sinners.

Brothers and sisters, wasn't it one of the most wonderful things in the Gospels as people looked at Jesus and said, He eats with sinners. This very table in front of us this morning, do you know what it says to us?

He still does. He still does. Could we with ink the ocean fill, and where the skies of parchment made, where every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade, to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry, nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretch from sky to sky.

Let's pray. gracious heavenly Father, how very glad we are that in you, in your eternal being, your triune being, a Father, Son, and Spirit, how very glad we are that in you there is an ocean of love. We will spend eternity exploring the depths and the wonders, the greatness of your compassion for us, lost and broken sinners. Your compassion to Jonah astonishes us.

[ 40 : 57 ] Your compassion to Nineveh amazes us. And so we, too, take our place this morning in one of the cities of the earth, a city that loves power and wealth and prestige, a city that can do things and make things happen and go places, a city that is lost.

God, we want to thank you that you have found us here at your table, seated at your side.

And so we give ourselves to you again afresh this very day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.