

## What Does Believing Look Like?

**G**REEN AND GROWING. The color for the season of Epiphany is green. Green is the color of growth. During this season we see Jesus growing. At every stage and every age of his life Jesus became our Savior. He perfectly obeyed God's law in our place for us. But this season of Epiphany doesn't just teach us that he grew. Jesus gives to us the Holy Spirit. He gives to us this gift of faith. Now we are his disciples. And this morning it leads us to ask the question: *What Does A Believer Look like?* And so, in the Old Testament, we find this prophet Jonah. And through his ministry the Holy Spirit leads us into an answer to that question. And so we read in Jonah 3: *"Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.' The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."* (Jonah 3:3–5 NIV)

What does believing in the LORD look like? Here in these words we see it in action. Believing means leaving. Years ago there was a boy in a field. He spent hours playing with his friends in the field. And, at the end of the day he was hungry. And off, in the distance, he saw an apple tree. "who knows" he thought to himself "maybe this tree has some apples on it still. He got to the tree and couldn't find any apples. So, in the sunset light, he looked in the grass for an apple. He found one. He picked it up and brought the apple to his mouth. But then he suddenly stopped. With shock and horror he remembered that there were horses in this field. And with how horrible this apple smelled, he realized that he was not holding an apple. And so, what did he do with the apple? He dropped it?

Think of this picture when you think of the Ninevites. Jonah came through town and in one day crushed them. He preached his sermon theme: *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."* (Jonah 3:4 NIV)<sup>1</sup> And the weight of his words crushed them. All of a sudden their sinful lives smelled as good as a horse-apple.

They felt the crushing weight of Jonah's words. But even worse, they heard the crushing verdict of Jonah's words. Because they were sinful God would

overturn Nineveh just as he did to Sodom and Gomorrah. And then after that God would punish them in hell.

And so, my brothers and sisters. *That* is what they left. But along with that we need to ask another question. *What* did they leave? Their lives had changed. And they quickly gave up people, places and things. The people they used to lead into sin and be led into sin with—they abandoned them. The places that tempted them to sin, they left. The things which were their lives meant nothing to them anymore. So they left them.

And what was in their hearts showed itself in their hands. Jonah tells us that they declared a fast.<sup>2</sup> And they put on sackcloth.<sup>3</sup> Now, my brothers and sisters, this is something you have to picture. Picture a hundred thousand people sitting in the streets. Picture the ones who used to wear comfortable and costly clothing now wearing sackcloth. Picture a hundred thousand people burning trees to make ashes. And then when they had those cold ashes on their heads to show everyone around them and God above that they were worth as much as dirt, or even less because of their sin. They left their sinful lives. If you want to know what believing looks like just look there. Look at those dusty streets filled with people pouring dusty ashes on themselves.

Believing the LORD means leaving a sinful life. If that's what it looks like for them, it hasn't changed for us. And, unless you find yourself there with the Ninevites with the sackcloth on your back and the ashes and dust on your head, you will never make it into heaven. What I mean it this: Jesus doesn't just call on us to leave our sinful lives behind on that one day he came to us with water and word and gave us this gift of faith and forgiveness. No, he calls on us to leave our sinful lives *every* day.

Believing is leaving. And so, let me ask you questions that you can ask yourself. Are you leaving your sinful life or are you loving it? There might be people in your life who are constantly seek to take you away from Jesus. Are you willing to follow them or Jesus? There might be places which you know you shouldn't be—places which lead you back into your sinful life. Are you willing to leave them and follow Jesus? And finally, what about the things? If ever there were a source for temptation for us, it's our things. Whether it's your hunting rifle or your sewing needle; your book in the bedroom or

<sup>1</sup> עֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוָה נִהְפָּךְ

<sup>2</sup> וַיִּקְרְאוּ צוֹם <sup>3</sup> וַיִּלְבְּשוּ שָׂקִים

your cable tv in the living room, how often do they tempt you to cling to them and to love them instead of following your Savior? How often will you gladly buy a book, pay a cable tv bill or go to a movie, but when it comes to giving generously and graciously in the offering plate, there is where we hesitate.

Believing is leaving. If the people, places and things of this life are more precious and more of a priority than the LORD you need to sit there in the streets of Nineveh. You need to smell the stench of your sin. You need to see the hell where it leads to.

Believing is leaving. That's what being a disciple of Christ looks like. But my brothers and sisters, that's not all that it looks like. Believing is also receiving. Jonah tells us: *"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."* (Jonah 3:10 NIV)

Years ago I remember seeing a little boy about two years old. He was in his little car seat in the back seat of his mini-van. He was playing with his ball with such joy and such contentment. Then he looked out of his window. And there above the trees he saw the water tower. But the boy didn't know it was a water tower. His eyes got big. His mouth dropped. And with profound wonder in his voice he said "BALL!" And the ball in his hands silently fell to the floor.

And my brothers and sisters, that is what believing is. Believing is not just leaving the sinful life. It's receiving far more than we can ask for or imagine. And that is exactly what the Ninevites got. They didn't ask for it. They didn't search for it. But God searched for them and found them.

And through this gift of faith they dropped their sinful lives and received God's great gift of forgiveness and all that comes with it. Jonah tells us that the LORD had compassion on them.<sup>4</sup> He poured out his mercy on them. He rescued them from the fire falling from the sky. He rescued them from the eternal fire of hell. Why? It all comes down to that one word, mercy.

And when God showed that mercy to them it changed their lives. It changed the people, places and things in their lives. With only a little imagination we can picture a hundred thousand people who are moved by God's

Spirit to lead each other to God's word instead of to sin. With only a little imagination we can see the places changing too. They used to go to pagan temples. But now they gather together. And they maybe even built synagogues and new places to worship the LORD. And what about the things? With so little imagination we can see a people who used to save up money for themselves—their clothing, their hobbies. But now, picture people saving up money for a place of worship. Or, picture people saving up money so that they can take that long journey to the temple in Jerusalem. They received this forgiveness gladly. And then they lived gladly for their LORD.

My brothers and sisters, look at these Ninevites and see yourselves. See a pagan people whom God has showered his mercy on. See a people who used to bear the shame and guilt of sin, but now wear Christ's righteousness. See a people who willingly leave their sinful lives behind. One of the most treasured parts of Luther's Small catechism is the fourth part of baptism. Do you remember it? Listen to these familiar words yet once more and see what God moves you do and to be:

*Fourth: What does baptizing with water mean?*

Baptism means that the Old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Baptism moves us to drown our sinful nature and all its evil desires every day. It moves us to confess our sins. It moves us to leave our sinful life because the faith he gives us through baptism is that strong. And the Savior to which our faith clings is just that merciful.

Believing is leaving. And rejoice! For it is also receiving. After that day, those Ninevites gathered together. But they no longer gathered together in sadness. Instead they gathered together in gladness. They gladly heard God's word. They gladly shared God's word. They gladly gave to support the ministry of that word. I invite you to do the same. Look back at those dusty streets and dusty heads and take to heart what believing is. Believing is leaving. And believing is receiving.

<sup>4</sup> וַיְחַמֵּן