

Text: Jonah 4:1-9

My purpose for this message: Urge us to examine ourselves to see if we live like we are at the center of the Universe.

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The Center of the Universe

This morning I want you to think about what you think. If you've attended Keystone any length of time, you know by now that a lot of my sermons address your heart, your mind, and not just behavior or actions. You may wonder, "Why doesn't he give us more concrete things to do?"

Any change in what you do will be a *shortlived* change if there isn't first a change in what you think; doing starts with thinking. For instance, if I asked us all to watch our mouths: stop cursing, telling dirty, questionable, or bigoted jokes, or using potty language, we'd have to first *decide* (heart and mind) why we would *want* to make those changes:

- Improve testimony for Jesus Christ
- My children would see how to live with a controlled tongue
- Eliminate the guilt I sometimes feel
- Give pleasure to Christ

The thinking I want us to evaluate this morning, is whom is the center of your universe? Whom is at the center of your universe? The first year or two of our lives, our world revolved around us didn't it? I was carried and cuddled, changed, held and fed. I was dressed, played with, cooed over and fussed at by grandparents.... It's no wonder by 17 we all looked around and wonder, "Whoa, what happened?" Nobody was waiting on us hand and foot anymore. In fact, I was expected to do chores around the house, *and* get a job, to speak respectfully to others, don't slam doors and leave lights on, study hard and don't watch too much TV, and wipe down the shower when I was done. I didn't get an allowance anymore, and my parents expected me home by a certain time. Nobody consulted me about when to have dinner or what would be on the menu. How come I'm not the center of the universe anymore?

Some still try to be. Women, you can buy tanks and t-shirts at Kohl's that read, "It's all about me!" Psychiatrists call our self-absorption Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) but honestly, to a greater or lesser degree, we *all* think we're the center of the universe.

But as Max Lucado observed rather dryly, "When God looks at the center of the universe, He doesn't look at you." As Christians, there is a change that must occur in our thinking much like occurred in the people of the 16th and 17 centuries. Up 'til then, everyone believed as Aristotle and Ptolemy taught: the sun revolves around the earth. But Copernicus was convinced otherwise by the mid-16th century, and when his successor Galileo published his findings that the planets revolved around the sun, they sent him to prison for the rest of his life. Blasphemy, they called it. Who is the center of your universe? READ Jonah 4:1-9.

Story

I think Charles Feinberg was right when he wrote in his commentary on Jonah, that, had the Holy Spirit failed to show up when this book was written, it would have been 3 chapters long, not 4. The fairy tale ending would have gone like this: Jonah preached to Nineveh after all, Nineveh repents, God spares Nineveh.

But there was more. More that—unfortunately—doesn't put Jonah in a good light. *Which* convinces me all the more that this book's from the mouth of God and not just

human authors. With the best of intentions, by not including certain words and deeds, they would have air brushed a guy like this so that he comes out smelling like a rose. But not God; He tells it like they are, both the good *and* the bad.

V.1

As Jonah's eyes swept the Nineveh streets full of people dressed in sackcloth and crying out to God, he was livid. The Hebrew text of v.1 says something like this: *But it was grievous to Jonah—a great evil...* What had been true of the Ninevites, Jonah thinks is now true of God.

V.2

This is exactly what he had feared. And v.2 finally tells us why Jonah ran from God. It wasn't because he was afraid of Nineveh's citizens, or opposed to being a missionary and learning a new language. He disliked the Ninevites, *and* didn't trust God's resolve. "What if God goes wobbly and doesn't unleash the judgment these people so richly deserve?" Sure enough, when Nineveh repented, God caved.

V.3

Which was the final straw for Jonah. "Life's not worth living anymore, so go ahead and kill me Lord." Seems kind of extreme doesn't it? God very patiently questioned him, "Do you think you have a right to be angry?" No answer. Parents, when your teenager slinks away with a surly expression on his/her face, and doesn't answer a simple question, does that make you as angry as it did me?! *Oh* that used to make me bristle.

Jonah walked away. Didn't answer God's question, sat down outside the city to wait and see what was going to happen. Apparently, he still hoped God would change His mind. It was a hot day. Probably during summer which gets brutally hot. Modern day Mosul in Iraq is built on the southern suburbs of ancient Nineveh and it's supposed to get up to 119 today! (By the way, if you read certain Scriptures from the writers' perspectives—who were all residents of the very hot Middle East, you get a whole new appreciation on some verses. Ex: Rev. 7:16 not as someone who knows the cold and snows of winter, but as a Middle Eastern resident. It describes how good heaven's going to be: *Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.*)

Vv.6-9

God—still giving out grace—"provided" (*ordained* as in 1:17) a protective vine. In a miraculous matter of hours, maybe minutes, a large leafy vine appeared and shaded Jonah like a tree would. Jonah smiled! V.6 says *Jonah was very happy about the vine*. He slept under it that night. But at dawn the next day when the heat started to build, God "provided" (*ordained*) a worm to have Jonah's shade for breakfast. Suddenly the prophet was exposed again to the sun and he wasn't happy. To make matters worse, God "provided" (*ordained*) a sandstorm kind of wind to add to the heat.

The scirocco that comes out of the Sahara Desert or North Africa is a hot, blistering wind so full of positive ions that it affects the brain serotonin and other neurotransmitters. What can follow is exhaustion, depression, feelings of unreality, and occasionally, bizarre behavior. In fact, some Arab countries even permit their judges to make allowances for defendants who committed crimes during a scirocco.

With his shade gone and the heat intensified by the wind, Jonah was furious. Ignorant that God had him in school, he lashed out yet again. “It would be better for me to die than live.”

“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”

“I do. I am angry enough to die.” When a person feels like he’s lost all control in his life, suicide becomes attractive because it’s a way to exert control. When God intercepted him in the high seas, Jonah had lost control of his destination. When God strong-armed Jonah into going to Nineveh, he lost control of his destiny. And when God backed away from destroying Nineveh, raised a shady protection for Jonah and then destroyed it, and sent a brutal wind to torment Jonah, Jonah lost his control of God. Lloyd Olgilvie says, “For a willful, controlling person, there is nothing so abhorrent as not being able to control God.”

God was educating Jonah on Whom is at the center of the universe, but in his fury Jonah missed it. It’s all about me; it’s my way or the highway; I know best. Judge those people I dislike; provide for me; comfort me... God, DON’T YOU SEE THAT I AM THE CENTER OF YOUR UNIVERSE!?!

I’ve never said that—in so many words. Or thought it—in so many words. But I have *lived* like that; Many days. We can tell it can’t we? Can tell who’s the center of our universe by our reluctance or willingness to fraternize with people that make us squirm. Or, we can tell it by the pristine—or ragged nature of our Bibles.

We can tell Whom the planets orbit around by how familiar or unfamiliar we are with prayer. By how clean or how dirty our hands are—and not from our flowerbeds. We can tell Who’s our center by the consistency of our truth or the predictability of our lies. Or, how willing we are to go *anywhere*? Or, whether our things rule us, or we rule them. Who’s *at* the center of our universe?

I had to chuckle as I finished this sermon yesterday. Earlier at the elders’ prayer meeting I admitted, “I’m stuck. I’m at a certain point in the message and I don’t know where to go from there.” I had already changed the title, was considering including more verses than originally, but I wasn’t even sure exactly what my point was! And if I don’t know, you won’t!

Anyway, they did pray for me, and praise God, later in the morning things were really coming together. But as I thought about why it mattered so much that I get the sermon done, get it done right, and get it done well, I realized that there were a whole host of reasons that had very little to do with Who’s the center of the universe; they were all about me:

- I wanted to get the message done in a timely fashion so I could have some of the Saturday to myself.
- I wanted to do it well enough so that some of you would admire my preaching
- I wanted to cover the bases adequately so that I would be protected from criticism

Something as innocent as preparing a sermon can be so me-centered. Who gets the glory? Whose mission am I on? Whose praise am I promoting? Whose purposes am I serving? Whose orders am I obeying? Whose the General and who’s the private? Ask yourself those kinds of questions and you’ll start to see what I mean when I say, doing starts with thinking. Who gets the glory? Whose mission am I on? Whose praise am I promoting? Whose purposes am I serving? Whose orders am I obeying? Whose the General and who’s the private?

Concl:

When we put someone or something in the center of the universe that doesn't belong there, it disturbs and disrupts everything we do.

A couple of weeks ago I filled up my lawn sprayer to try and kill the Japanese beetles on our roses. Pumped air pressure in and began to spray. Nothing came out of the nozzle. I took it apart and sprayed water through it. Tried again, still nothing. After another failed try, I took the nozzle off this application wand and carefully inspected the center distribution area where the mixture's supposed to come out. The water and chemicals travel down this brass wand and then out the center distribution area: 2 1/8 inch diameter holes that are across from each other. That's what's *supposed* to happen at least. Although I had checked those holes 3 or 4 times, I finally saw that a wasp had crawled inside the wand and died. His body was blocking the holes. Once I removed him, everything worked fine.

When we put someone or something in the center of the universe that doesn't belong there, it disturbs and disrupts everything we do. We're going to delve into this more next week when we look at v.10 and talk about who *is* the center of the universe. *For from [God] and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever!* (Romans 11:36)