



Fast of Jonah

February 6-9, 2017



Amel Pain/EPA

The Iraqi Christian Relief Council is petitioning all Christians in the United States to join their Assyrian Christian brothers and sisters around the world in observing the three-day Fast of Jonah this February.

For the last 13 years – and especially during the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – Assyrian Christians around the Middle East have paid a heavy price for their faith in Jesus Christ.

In order to promote solidarity with the persecuted church in the Middle East, beg the Lord for his mercy, and to usher in peace in war-torn Iraq and Syria, churches and communities across the United States are also invited to host a prayer vigil that will follow on the fourth day, the day of “giving thanks”.

This year, the fast of Jonah will take place February 6-8, followed by a day of thanksgiving and prayer on Thursday, February 9.



What is the Fast of Jonah?

The Fast of Jonah, also known as the Rogation of the Ninevites, is an annual three-day fast that usually is observed three weeks before Lent. The fast is based on Jonah 3:4-5, which describes how the people reacted when they heard Jonah's prophecy of judgment against their city:

Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

As Jonah had feared, the Lord heard the prayers of the repentant Ninevites, and did not destroy them as he had promised.

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it (3:10).

How is the fast of Jonah observed today?

The tradition of observing the fast of Jonah began around the 6th century A.D, in what is now modern-day Iraq. During that time, the cities of Nineveh (Mosul), Erbil and Bet-Garmeh (Kirkuk) fell victim to a deadly plague that lasted for 12 years and took countless lives.

The bishop of the Church of the East, Mar Sabrisho, called for the entire Assyrian nation to pray and fast for three days, begging the Lord to rescue them from the plague upon their people. This fast was later incorporated into the tradition of the Church of the East and is now observed by many other Eastern denominations like the Coptic and Armenian Christians.

Who are the Assyrians?

The Assyrian Christians (also known as Syriac and Chaldean) are an ancient nation, descended from the same Ninevites who repented when they heard Jonah's message. The Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew preached the gospel to the Assyrians of Iraq soon after Christ's resurrection, and the Assyrians became one of the first nations to convert to Christianity.

Assyrians have inhabited their homeland of the Nineveh Plains, a swath of fertile land in Northern Iraq surrounding Mosul (Nineveh), for more than 5,000 years. However, a steady century of escalating persecution at the hands of tyrants and radical Islamists has scattered the Assyrians around the Middle East. In 2003, there were approximately 1.5 million Assyrian Christians living Iraq and Syria; now, only 200,000 remain.



The rise of the Islamic State in 2014 devastated the Assyrian Christian community of Iraq and Syria, as churches were destroyed, families fled their homes, women and children were sold into slavery and untold numbers lost their lives for refusing to deny their Savior Jesus Christ.

Why should American churches participate in the fast of Jonah this year?

With the liberation of Christian towns of the Nineveh Plain and the ongoing campaign to retake Mosul from the Islamic State, it is now possible for Assyrian Christians to return to their homes after two years of forced displacement. However, the devastation and destruction that the Islamic State left behind means that there is much to be done before the Assyrian Christians are safe and secure in their ancient homeland of the Nineveh Plain.

Our Christian history is sprinkled with many miracles delivered by God in response to faithful prayer and fasting; the story of the repentance of Nineveh is only one example. In 2 Chronicles 7:14, the Lord says this:

If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins and heal their land.

The American church has steadfastly supported their suffering brothers and sisters in Christ over the last few years. Now, the time has come for Western Christians to join the Eastern church to fast and to pray in solidarity.



Prayers from the Liturgy of the Assyrian Church

*In pain and tears and fervent prayer,
we cry to you, good Lord above!
Be our healer and our wise guide:
deep are our wounds; bitter our pain.*

*We have no right to plead to you:
our faults abound, our malice soars.
The sea and land, and all therein
have quaked and raged due to our sin.*

*In our own time, as Scripture says,
the end of days has come upon us.
In mercy, save us from distress,
for height and depth have been confused.*

*O Good Shepherd, come tend your flock,
for whose sake you endured the cross.
Make peace for us in Church and world,
that we may live a tranquil life.*

*May we be yours, as is your will:
Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost.
From age to age, amen, amen.*





Ahmed Jadallah / Reuters

*Come, let us repent now, while we have time,
lest we repent then, without benefit.*

*Who is patient enough to speak of your patience with our sins?
If we sin, we become filled with wickedness,
if we do good, we become filled with pride;
and toward one another, we are cruel and merciless:
we are jealous of one who succeeds, we rejoice over one who falls.
And though our life is short, the list of our sins is long.*

*You limited our lifespan to seventy years at best,
but with these seventy, we have sinned seventy times seven over.
You limited our life that our sins may not lengthen.
I marvel at your Mercies, which overcame your Justice:
even an impure man despises one impure like himself,
yet you, who are holy, have not despised us.*

*I am humbled by your Justice which does not despise us,
as well as by your Grace, which is patient in teaching us,
and how you dawn your sun upon those who upset you.
You give without limit; we lose without measure.
You taught us order; we act against it.
We have put on mere names, and have stripped off good works.*



Felipe Dana / AP

*Plead, O pleaders, and do not cease while there is time for pleading,
before the Giver shuts the door, and closes up his treasury.
Were you to call in groaning, he would answer you sweetly,
and were you to ask in repentance, you would receive abundantly.
The Rich One who is full of mercies does not become poor when he gives:
his treasure is one of mercy, a chasm filled with pity.
Approach, you repentant, and ask for mercies
while there is time for repentance.*

*Let each one leave off all bitterness of heart and ask for mercies and pity.
Let us heal and be healed, my brethren, that we may be healthy for work.
This is the time for repentance! Let us work hard in pleading!
Wrath now runs upon the earth: cut off his course, O repentant!
Let us be plowmen in fasting, that our seed bring forth a hundredfold.
Let us be workers in prayer, for it is a vine of comfort.
Let us be builders of our hearts, that they may be fitting temples of God.*