

“JONAH: The Pouting Prophet”

A sermon by

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Sunday, May 19, 2019

TEXTS: Jonah 4:1-11 and Colossians 3:12-15

Jonah 4:1-11

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ And the LORD said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so, Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’

But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ Then the LORD said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

Colossians 3:12-15

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Perhaps the godliest woman I have ever met was my grandmother. She helped raise me. I was a close observer of her life and faith for eighteen years until I went away to college.

Nanny didn’t like confrontation. That’s understandable. She was only five feet tall. Even so, she and my mother would occasionally disagree on some fine point of cooking, housecleaning, or the disciplining of my brother or me. When that happened, my grandmother never stood her ground and fought. Instead, she would get a hurt look in her eyes, withdraw from the situation, and remark, “I’ll just go in my room and wait until Jesus comes!”

When I do pre-marital counseling and discuss conflict resolution, I tell couples that one person in the relationship is often more of a “pouter” and the other is more of a “shouter.” Occasionally, you get two “shouters” or two “pouters.” However, that is rare because two shouters and two pouters rarely make it

past the dating relationship. Unless we learn new skills, we resort to our “go to” patterns of behavior because they have worked for us in the past.

Nanny was a classic pouter. So was Jonah.

This is the second time Jonah prays. The first prayer was out of desperation. He had spent three days and three nights in the belly of the big fish. He changed his mind, vowed to go to Nineveh, and render the message God intended. Jonah repented. This time, Jonah prays out of frustration, disappointment, and anger. He is angry with God. In fact, in the Hebrew, it literally translates that Jonah “is being hot” with God.

Jonah is hot. Why?

Remember back to the first sermon on Jonah? In it, I said, and I quote, “This entire book is not about Jonah. It is not even about a big fish. The book is about God.”

GOD’S CHARACTER IS REVEALED

There is a wonderful story about Moses in the Book of Exodus. If you remember, Moses has gone up the mountain a second time to get a second set of tablets on which were written the commandments of God. In his anger, Moses broke the first set when he saw the people worshiping the golden calf that Aaron had fashioned for them. Now God tells Moses to prepare a second set of tablets. Early in the morning on Mt. Sinai, God descends in a cloud proclaims the name, “The Lord.” Then God passes before Moses and proclaims, *“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by now means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.”* (Exodus 34:6-7)

In 2 Chronicles 20, the nation of Judah is attacked by the Moabites and the Ammonites, dreaded enemies. King Jehoshaphat prays. Then the armies of Judah go to meet the enemy. The king put the Levites, at the front of the soldiers. They sang this song. *“Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever.”* (2 Chronicles 20:21) The armies of Moab and Ammon turned on each other and destroyed one another. The army of Judah prevailed without ever having to fight.

The point of these two stories is that the character of God was well known in Israel and Judah. Israel and Judah had a long history with the God. Jonah, along with all his fellow Jews, knew exactly what God is like.

That wasn’t the problem. Jonah had no upset with God being gracious toward him. God had no quarrel with God being gracious and merciful to the Jews. What Jonah struggled with was God being gracious and merciful to the enemies of Israel. God gave them opportunity to repent. God sent a messenger to call them to repentance. When the Ninevites repented, God relented from the destruction and judgment He had sent Jonah to proclaim.

This explains Jonah’s second prayer, *“O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”* (Jonah 4:2)

You would think that Jonah would be ecstatic! God had used him mightily. His simple message resulted in a whole city, known for its violence and wickedness to repent and turn to God. Jonah has learned to obey God. Jonah has yet to love other people the way that God loves other people.

God Is Available

The wonderful thing about this story is that the very things that Jonah received, for which he praised God, are the very things that now anger Jonah about God. When he faced certain death in the belly of the fish, Jonah cried out to God. God heard his cry and rescued him. When the Ninevites faced certain judgment, they cried out to God. God heard their prayers. God spared the city.

Why wouldn’t Jonah want the same availability of God to the Ninevites that he had enjoyed? Why would he not want God to love the Ninevites? What about us? Who are the people from whom we withhold love, forgiveness, tolerance, or grace because we have been offended, hurt, or ill-treated by them?

Jesus would later teach, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be*

children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:43-45)

God Is Gracious

Grace is undeserved favor. Jonah disobeyed. He didn't deserve to be saved from the belly of the fish, but God saved him, nevertheless. The Ninevites were evil, without question. They didn't deserve to be spared. Even so, God spared them. Dr. William Power, a professor at Southern Methodist University, describes an experience he had in Sunday School when he was a boy. His teacher was trying to explain to him and his rowdy friends the meaning of grace. She wasn't getting very far. She tried definitions and abstractions, to no avail. Finally, she realized something the boys had known from the start. They didn't have the foggiest notion what she was talking about.

She took a deep breath and tried again: "Look boys, grace is the break you get when you don't deserve it. That's the simple explanation. But you won't really understand it untilⁱ you experience it."

We are to reflect God's image. The grace we get from God is the grace we are to give to those around us.

God Is Merciful

Jesus taught in Luke 6:36, *“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”* The dictionary definition of mercy is “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or to harm.” Grace is the attitude that results in the act or action of mercy. I love what Shakespeare said of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*. “The quality of mercy is not strained (that is constrained or forced). It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes the thronèd monarch better than his crown. His scepter shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings, but mercy is above this sceptered sway. It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings. It is an attribute to God himself. And earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice.”

Did you catch that? We are most like God when we show mercy to others.

God Is Longsuffering

Have you ever known someone with a short fuse? They get angry without warning. They are like a sudden storm. Without warning, they explode. God is not this way. God is slow to anger. In addition, although we often work iniquity with our anger, God bears only righteous anger. Yet, even Jonah recognizes that God is slow to anger. How does he know? He has been spared God's fury.

God Is Abundant In Love

The Hebrew word for love here is *chesed*. It is a word that translates as “love,” “kindness,” or often, “loving-kindness.” It is used more than 240 times in the Old Testament. *Chesed* is personal. It requires an interaction between persons. It is not a quality apart from an action. The closest example of *chesed* is our understanding of the Greek word *agape* in the New Testament. It is an act of love that is not based on emotion. It is based on the sacrifice of the one showing the action. It is a love of self-surrender.

Jonah's Reaction

Jonah's reaction in this chapter is classic. Jonah, the pouting prophet, heads east of the city of Nineveh. He has set himself in a position to observe what will happen to Nineveh.

It Is Not Our Position to Judge

Jonah waits. He waits some more. He sees activity in the city. What is this? There is no destruction, no devastation, no judgment. Jonah fumes. He knew it. He builds a booth to make a little shade. This is not an area of forests and trees. Likely, anything he builds will be of stone and dirt. Jonah is going to stay and watch what happens. How long will he wait? Likely, he is going to stick around for the forty original days to see what God will do. Maybe the Ninevites will go back to their old ways. Maybe God will finally see things Jonah's way.

But nothing happens. Jonah is hot with God and the temperature outside is hot. There is no water here. He is on a hill. He is thirsty. He is uncomfortable. Jonah is miserable. Nothing has gone the way he wanted it to go.

So, Jonah begs God to take his life. As far as he is concerned, his reputation as a prophet is over. "I might as well be dead," he thinks. "If I were God, I would certainly destroy Nineveh. They are wicked, they don't deserve to live; and if they get to live, then this is a not the kind of world where I want to live." Jesus will later teach, *"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not see the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye, while the log is in your own eye.'"* (Matthew 7:1-4)

B. It Is Not Our Position to Be Comfortable

Once again, God is merciful. God is gracious toward Jonah. God causes a bush to grow up to provide Jonah with some additional shade.

Did you see someone enter worship during the sermon last Sunday? That was Matthew Wiatt, Fayette's son. He wasn't aware that we had moved the time of the worship service to 10:30 AM. After the service, Matthew told me that he had been in Nineveh during the Iraq War. He had walked in the steps of Jonah. He had gone to the hill east of the city where Jonah likely sat.

He indicated that their guides pointed to a plant that was then blooming. Matthew said that it seemed that its blossoms were like those of the Morning Glory Vine.

In Hebrew the plant is called "kikayon." Biblical scholars agree that it is likely the Castor Bean plant, the source for that childhood favorite, castor oil. It is also called the *palma Christi*, the palm of Christ. The leaves are large. They would provide good shade.

Jonah is happy about this plant. It is providing necessary shade to keep him cooler. For the very first time in this very short book, Jonah is happy.

However, just as Jonah is beginning to enjoy the shade, God sends a worm to attack the bush. It gets warmer. A hot wind begins to blow. God has prepared four things to help Jonah learn God's ways. First, God prepared a fish. Then God prepared a plant. Next God prepared a worm. Then God prepared a hot east wind.

As a result, Jonah is now more miserable than he before. Once again, Jonah begs to die. He is grieving for the bush that God made for him and that God has now taken away. God has taken away Jonah's comfort and Jonah is ticked. Why? Probably for the same reason we get upset with God sometimes.

III. Our Complicity

We love to experience God's grace. We sing about God's grace. We preach about God's grace. However, if the truth be told, we only enjoy God's grace for ourselves. When we are in trouble or disobey God we are quick to appeal to God's mercy. We rationalize, justify, and engage in a verbal song and dance. We want forgiveness. We desire mercy. Grace is what we need.

However, we see someone do the same thing we have done and become angry, disgusted, and frustrated. Why is it that we get passed on the Interstate by someone speeding and rejoice farther down the road we see them pulled over by a patrol car?

We quickly find ourselves in Jonah's sandals.

What Jonah forgot and that we too quickly forget is that no one deserves God's grace. Grace is grace because it isn't deserved. Mercy is mercy because it cannot be deserved, earned, or merited. That is true whether it is applied to us or to those we consider our enemies.

We should rejoice that others get to experience the grace and mercy of God precisely because we have experienced it, too. We know the grace of God. We should want others to experience that grace, as well. . . even our enemies.

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory! AMEN.

ⁱ James W. Moore, Some Things Are Too Good Not to Be True, Dimensions, 1994, p. 95