

Epic Tales – 4. Jonah and the Whale

Jonah 1:1-5, 15-17

June 25, 2023

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We've reached the conclusion of our Epic Tales sermon series - and having learned about Daniel, David, and Joseph — today we'll learn a *whale of a tale*: Jonah. Like weeks prior, this is a common story taught in Sunday school. And for good reason! It is a story of adventure that borders on believability, that centers on a hero who seems most unlikely.

The story of Jonah tells us about a reluctant and rebellious prophet who refuses God's direction and runs in the opposite direction. Storms ensue, and Jonah finds himself in the belly of a whale... conveniently, this whale spits Jonah to the shores of the precise place where God had directed Jonah in the first place! Once there, Jonah has gains courage to be the prophet God called him to be... and, in a surprise twist: when the people of Nineveh respond positively to Jonah's words and receive God's mercy... Jonah is left angry.

We'll get it into this in more depth, but as a whole, this is a story about the MERCY of God. Mercy that is shown widely and lavishly, to people who are most undeserving. We see it first in Jonah himself, and then in the people of Ninevah.

What then, is mercy? Here are three things to note:

- Responds to an Immediate Need or Situation
- Is compassion and forgiveness given to someone with whom you have the power to do otherwise.
- An extension of God's grace. Practicing mercy is grace in action.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that *doing mercy* is one way we experience - and share - the grace of God. And that as followers of Jesus, we are called to "works of piety" - which is the 'stuff' we do to grow closer to Jesus, like reading scriptures, attending worship, sharing sacraments, and being in small groups. AND we are called to practice "works of mercy" - which are the individual and community practices of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, advocating to end oppression and discrimination (for Wesley, this meant speaking out against slavery) and caring for the poor. Practicing these two: piety & mercy, together, taught Wesley, we will experience God's grace, growing our faith and the kingdom of God.

This story of Jonah gives us a clear example of two ways that God shows mercy upon us. The book of Jonah begins with a command from God and an immediate response from Jonah:

The Lord said to Jonah, "Get up and go to Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention." So Jonah got up - to flee to Tarshish from the Lord! (1:1-3)

Well, this is setting the scene for an adventure, isn't it? Jonah is a prophet, which means he is someone that God calls to proclaim a message of transformation and redemption to a specific people. It is not an easy job, calling people to be opened to seeing the wrongs of their ways and correcting them. They usually have harsh words for the ways people are behaving, and strong warnings about what this means for their future. But they also always include words about how to direct course - reminding us that we are never too far gone, and always have opportunities for second chances and forgiveness.

Prophets proclaim God's mercy. They respond to an immediate need, they give specific examples of behavior to be changed, and they outline God's compassion which will follow. Prophets stir within us a change of heart. They bring forth revolution. They change the world.

And many times, in the ancient world as well as today, they are vilified for it - or even killed. Being a prophet is no easy task. But here, God makes it even more difficult on Jonah because God directs Jonah to go to Ninevah. Which is the *very last* place Jonah would want to go.

Ninevah was the capitol of Assyria — who were the big bullies of the time. They occupied modern-day Iraq and dominated surrounding areas. They caused active and intentional harm to the people of Israel, among many others. Ninevah is a serious threat. And it is the epicenter of danger or evil for Jonah and his people.

It's asking a prophet from Ukraine to make his way to Moscow. It is a terrifying ask. And so Jonah does, what I think many of us might do... he runs. Jonah doesn't just plant himself and stay home. He takes off in the opposite direction. It is an exaggerated response to be sure, but as we hear in the story of Jonah — everything seems a little over the top! This, by the way, makes Jonah one of the only prophets that doesn't immediately respond and come running when God calls.

Jonah then finds himself on a ship headed away from Ninevah. We're told a great storm appears - so strong that it looked like the ship might be broken into pieces. The sailors, even those with experience, are terrified. They each called out to their God, and began hurling things from the ship to make it lighter. They were frantic, and looking for any way that might increase their chances of survival.

Meanwhile, Jonah is asleep in the bottom of the ship, and doesn't wake until someone comes to get him, saying:

"How can you possibly sleep so deeply? Get up! Call on your God! Perhaps the god will give some thought to us so we don't perish!" (1:5-6)

This reminds me a bit of a story of Jesus at sea, too. He also was asleep in the boat when a great storm arrived. The disciples, experienced fishermen, were terrified too — just like the sailors in Jonah's story. The disciples feared for their lives, and woke Jesus harshly: "Don't you care if we drown?" they say to him (Mark 4:38*

And I realize here, that experiencing storms in our lives is nothing new. Now, I have zero experience commanding a boat through a storm... I hardly have any experience commanding a boat on a perfect day, either. But I do know, and suspect you do, too - what it is to have storms in life.

There are several storms in life which come to mind, but most recently was the fall of 2020. The pandemic was a few months in at that point, but my congregation was still worshipping exclusively online, we were avoiding public spaces and vigilant with our masks. Like many, my spouse and I were working full time from home with our three boys exclusively at home, too. They were 7, 4, and 1 at the time.

On top of the shared experiences of the pandemic: my father in law had died months before, my brother in law had been in a serious accident, and my mom was diagnosed and being treated for breast cancer. We were overwhelmed, grieving, and had too many "things" to take care of:

selling my FIL's house and estate, supporting my mom, homeschooling my boys, pastoring two congregations.

The storm in our life was great. I felt, like the sailors today, like the winds could rip our ship in two. I remember vividly crying out to God, just as the disciples and sailors did. "Do you not care if we drown?" Some days it seemed like my whole world was rocking, and God was asleep in the bottom of a boat.

Standing here today, I'll tell you that the storm did not break us. And God was not absent, but neither did God stop the rain. Instead, God gave us a place of safety. A place to recoup. A time to find peace, healing, and strength.

- When you consider the storms in your life - what do you notice happened?
- Was there space between the darkness of the storms and rainbows of a new day?
- A break, a dash, between the "before" and the "after"?

For my family, oddly, in some ways the pandemic itself was that place of safety. In the walls of our home, my boys were protected, given stability, and space to learn and grow together. In the quiet of that time, my spouse and I could tend to our weary hearts. In the space which the pandemic required, we found new ways to support our family, to find healing and a path forward.

The space, you see, was a shelter from the storm. The evidence, the mess, was still all around us. But God gave us reprieve. A place of quiet peace to steady ourselves again. God showed us mercy by attending to the immediate needs of our lives and offering compassion.

For Jonah, this reprieve came in the belly of a whale. Realizing the storm was his own doing, Jonah was hurled into the sea. But Jonah did not drown. Instead, God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah, and he was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Side note here: we have all learned this story that Jonah spent these days in the belly of a whale, and I'll continue to make that reference today. But in Hebrew, the language that Jonah was first written, there was no word for Whale - and instead, scripture says only that he was in a "great fish".

God bringing to Jonah this great fish is an act of mercy. Jonah has not only disobeyed God, he actively ran the opposite direction. But instead of a punishment, God extends mercy: a second chance. A safe space to have a break in the storm, a time for Jonah to consider his actions, his fears, his next step. The belly of the whale is not the "after" of Jonah's story — it's more like an intermission.

An intentional pause. When Luke and I were in the middle of our storm of 2020, we took a few weeks off from work. We recognized in ourselves, that we needed an intermission — an intentional pause to tend to our own souls, fears, and work — and without doing so, we could risk burn out or unintentionally hurt those around us. You can't fill from an empty cup, right?

As I was thinking about Jonah this week, I realized how helpful a tool this "whale's belly" is... it doesn't have to be the biggest storm in your life, in order for you to need a little time apart. And actually, I think God is offering us a really helpful tool in our own self-care.

Having three young kids at home, a big part of our job as parents right now is helping them navigate relationships, learn about their own needs, emotions, and feelings, and give them tools to do all of these things with kindness and love.

Now, one thing I've learned about my kids... is that they very rarely pick a fight or disobey intentionally. Instead, there is a "root cause" for their words or actions. It might be that they are hungry or thirsty. Maybe they are tired. Perhaps they are overstimulated and need a little quiet. Or a good hug from mom or dad.

My kids are just learning how to pay attention to the needs of their bodies and tend to that *before* it results in saying or doing something unkind. But it is a lesson that will continue throughout their life times. Anyway, each of my kids require something different when they are upset or afraid. One needs a hug and snuggle time. Another almost always needs a snack. And I can guarantee the other almost always needs just a few minutes alone in his bedroom, his own whale's belly.

Sure, I could punish my kids for their misbehavior. And sometimes there are consequences. But instead, we choose to look at the "root cause" and address that. This gives them tools for their future, helps them learn about what they feel in their mind and body... and: it shows mercy. It's one way we give a second chance and opportunity to make things right.

I wonder then, if God isn't just addressing Jonah's "root cause" of his behavior. He likely was running from Nineveh because he was afraid. He couldn't talk to family or friends, because they would only agree that it was a *bad* idea. And so there was no space in his life to process his fears or ability to follow God's command.

And so, God gave Jonah a time out. Not as a way of punishment, but as an act of mercy. Space free from distraction, free from harm, to consider what was next. Because Jonah was not left or abandoned here, but was cradled in God's presence and care. It reminds me of Psalm 139, which is my favorite of all the Psalms. In verses 7-10 it reads:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in depths, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

There is not one place that is out of reach for God. Not a boat in the middle of the storm. Not the belly of a whale. Not even in the land of the "big bad" Nineveh. God's presence, mercy, and love will protect and shield you always. This is precisely what Jonah needed reminders of: that God is bigger than our fears. God is bigger than the storms in our lives. And God is merciful, so that you are never out of God's reach.

This time apart, these three days in the whale's belly? It worked. While in the belly, Jonah found ways to ask for God's help, seek God's forgiveness, and give thanks for God's mercy. At the end of the three days, Jonah was ready. So was God. When the whale "spits" Jonah out, he is already at Nineveh.

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, once described the Christian life as "a long obedience in the same direction." Until now, Jonah's journey was a short disobedience in the wrong direction. But it was not too late, and it is never too late, to change course.

I imagine Jonah - ragged and wide-eyed in his entering Nineveh. He is tired, but adrenaline is pumping through his body. He is nervous, but has a sense of urgency in his words. And, I'm assuming, he also looks pretty beat up and smells, too. His skin and clothes showing marks of surviving a storm at sea, and days in the stomach of a fish... Maybe his appearance gave greater urgency to his message for the people of Nineveh too, because they take seriously Jonah's words.

He tells them, "In 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown" and calls for their repentance to God. Surprisingly, the people of Nineveh repented immediately. Even the King changed his ways: seeking God's forgiveness and mercy. Once more, God shows mercy. Instead of punishing the people of Nineveh, God relented and forgave them.

Twice now, God's mercy has been extended in this story. First, to Jonah in response to his running away. And now to Nineveh, in response to their repentance. This illustrates to us, that God's mercy is for all people. No exceptions.

You see — Jonah is an Israelite, part of God's chosen people. He is in the "faith family" of Abraham and Moses, of Daniel and David and Joseph — the other men whose stories we've told this month. We expect God to show mercy to God's people. But God doesn't end there.

Because the people of Nineveh are not Jewish, they worship other gods, and are "outside" the story of God we've read in the Old Testament thus far. But God sent Jonah to them. Jonah was a prophet, but also a missionary. And this reminds us that God has a heart for all people, everywhere. "God so loved the world," the Gospel of John tells us — and here, in the story of Jonah we are reminded that God's love, God's mercy and justice is not reserved for a select few, but is for the whole world.

For a lot of us, this message stirs hope within us. It helps us believe we can never be outside the realm of God's presence and grace. It might make us excited and hopeful, too, that loved ones of ours in the middle of a storm right now, might also know God's mercy one day.

But it can also make us feel unsettled. Nineveh was an evil people. They were bullies and mean. And God... just forgave them? God showed them mercy — that is God showed compassion instead of punishment — to a people who have actively caused harm to lots of people?

This did not sit right with Jonah. He was *mad* at God for showing the Ninevites the same mercy that Jonah himself had received. He says, in chapter four,

"You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." (4:2)

And though these words *sound* like praises, they are anything but. Jonah is mad that God is merciful and loving to "people like them". Jonah is not praising God for these attributes, Jonah is saying, "I knew this would happen! This is why I didn't want to come here, I knew you would be merciful and loving"

And I don't know about you... but I can relate to Jonah here. I want God to be loving and merciful, forgiving and gracious. But it is also *really* hard to accept that God intends this for everyone. "It's not fair!" we might declare, and would not be alone. Jonah's voice joins us in harmony.

Along with many others throughout history. This is a known struggle for us, so much so that Jesus tells us stories about this, too. Remember the story of the prodigal son?

It tells us the story of a father with two sons. One of them, asks for his inheritance early - leaves the family home, squanders the money. Finally, finding himself - not in the belly of a whale — but in the mud and gunk of a pig pen, the son decides to return home. Better to live with the pigs of his Father's farm, than a stranger. But to his surprise, the Father sees him, and throws a BIG celebration. The father shows mercy to his son, rejoicing that he has found his way home. And this makes the other son very mad. Because this whole time he has stayed faithfully at home: tending to the duties responsibly, never causing a fuss. The older son is *mad* that the younger son receives mercy from their father. He has done everything wrong. He has squandered their fortune. He has left and been unkind. But to his return: a party is given. *While he was yet far off*, the father was already planning and rejoicing.

The good news of God, is that God *is* loving and gracious. God *is* slow to anger and full of mercy. God *does* practice justice and forgiveness and redemption. For all of us: even those **we** feel are unworthy. Remember, no one is out of reach for God. Not in a boat in a storm, not in a belly of a whale, not in the mud of a pig pen, and not in a city like Nineveh.

If this message of God's mercy and justice challenges you, you are not alone. And just maybe, that's the point. That God's mercy — which is the compassion and forgiveness of God given to you, and to all people, as a sign of God's boundless love and grace — really is for everyone. It's for you at your best and at your worst.

It's for "those" people who don't think, act, believe, or vote like you.

It's for the person who can't ever seem to get it right, and is always a mess.

It's even for the person who has hurt and harmed you.

God is a God of life, of redemption, and second chances.

God is merciful and compassionate.

God draws no boundaries, makes no exceptions.

The story of Jonah ends without us receiving resolution on his anger toward Nineveh. It doesn't wrap up neatly with a bow and happy ending. Instead, it holds up a mirror for each of us who read it.

It allows us to see ourselves in the story of Jonah: the ways we are afraid and run away, the places of reprieve God gives us in the storm, the ways try again to follow God's directions... *and* the ways we struggle to celebrate God's mercy for others.

This is a strange story that challenges us while proclaiming a message of good news about the wideness of God's mercy and love. And so, dear ones, there you have it: the Epic Tale of Jonah and the Whale.

This message isn't wrapped up neatly with a bow either, but, I hope, keeps you lingering and wondering:

- Where you have experienced God's mercy in your life?
- To whom do you struggle to share that same mercy and grace with others?
- And how, in this struggle, is God inviting you to grow?

God never abandoned Jonah - not in the boat, not in the belly, not in his anger toward Nineveh. Instead, God continued to give Jonah space, guidance, and wisdom to grow in his understanding of God and love of neighbor — even his love of stranger and enemy. May this same experience be yours this week, that God's spirit stir anew in you.

Let us pray:

Gracious and merciful God, we thank you for the story of Jonah and the ways that he models for us an example of transformation and discipleship. We praise you for the mercy and grace you

extend to us, even when we don't deserve it. And when your mercy for others makes us uncomfortable, give us courage to lean in, rather than hide, and find a way to learn more about you, and grow in our understanding and love of others. In your holy, precious, and redeeming name we pray: Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 25, 2023

Weekly Prayer

O God, you are my light and salvation. Living in your presence, I have nothing to fear. Open my heart to your word today. Help me be ready to follow you on whatever path you lead me. Cast aside my fears and doubts, teaching me to trust in you. Amen.

Monday, June 26

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-17

The LORD's word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention." So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the LORD! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD. But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, so that there was a great storm on the sea; the ship looked like it might be broken to pieces. The sailors were terrified, and each one cried out to his god. They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to make it lighter. Now Jonah had gone down into the hold of the vessel to lie down and was deep in sleep. The ship's officer came and said to him, "How can you possibly be sleeping so deeply? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps the god will give some thought to us so that we won't perish." Meanwhile, the sailors said to each other, "Come on, let's cast lots so that we might learn who is to blame for this evil that's happening to us." They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. So they said to him, "Tell us, since you're the cause of this evil happening to us: What do you do and where are you from? What's your country and of what people are you?" He said to them, "I'm a Hebrew. I worship the LORD, the God of heaven—who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were terrified and said to him, "What have you done?" (The men knew that Jonah was fleeing from the LORD, because he had told them.) They said to him, "What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us?" (The sea was continuing to rage.) He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea! Then the sea will become calm around you. I know it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you." The men rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn't manage it because the sea continued to rage against them. So they called on the LORD, saying, "Please, LORD, don't let us perish on account of this man's life, and don't blame us for innocent blood! You are the LORD: whatever you want, you can do." Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. The men worshipped the LORD with a profound reverence; they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made solemn promises.

Meanwhile, the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Observation

The book of Jonah is short, just four chapters, which we'll read together this week. It is a story that uses metaphor, wordplay, suspense, hyperbole, and humor to tell us about how God is at work in our lives and world.

Application

As we begin, Jonah flatly defies God's call, setting out to Tarshish trying to run from God. As the storm brews, the sailors discuss amongst themselves who had the bad luck to "cause" such a

storm upon them. Jonah then begins to take the blame, explaining in part: “I worship the Lord of heaven who made the sea and dry land.” Isn’t it interesting that Jonah was on the boat out of disobedience to God, while still claiming connection to God. Have you ever identified yourself as a follower of God, while also acting in ways that are disobedient? If so, how effective was your witness in this moment? Though recognizing this is important (and I’m sure that all of us have had this experience) don’t get stuck here either; the good news of God is that we aren’t abandoned in our disobedience but invited to follow again.

Prayer

God of the land, the oceans, the seas – you are magnificent and worthy to be praised. Even when I fail to obey or trust, you never give up! Thank you for calling me again and again to follow you. Amen.

Tuesday, June 27

Scripture: Jonah 2

Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish:
“I called out to the LORD in my distress, and he answered me.
From the belly of the underworld I cried out for help;
you have heard my voice.
You had cast me into the depths in the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounds me.
All your strong waves and rushing water passed over me.
So I said, ‘I have been driven away from your sight.
Will I ever again look on your holy temple?
Waters have grasped me to the point of death;
the deep surrounds me.
Seaweed is wrapped around my head
at the base of the undersea mountains.
I have sunk down to the underworld;
its bars held me with no end in sight.
But you brought me out of the pit.’
When my endurance was weakening,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
to your holy temple.
Those deceived by worthless things lose their chance for mercy.
But me, I will offer a sacrifice to you with a voice of thanks.
That which I have promised, I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”
Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

Observation

From the belly of a big fish (Hebrew had no word for “whale”), Jonah prayed to God. While my kids love to imagine what the belly of a whale would be like – wishing they could take a trip, as if on the Magic School Bus – I remind them, and us, that a lot of us have probably experienced a “night in the belly.” That is, a night in deep darkness, without a sense of direction or escape. As a metaphor, we can better understand what sleeping in the belly of a whale might be like.

Application

CS Lewis said, *“I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.”*

As Jonah spent time in the belly of the whale, a prayer came forth from his lips. It is a prayer seeking help, saying sorry, and finding thanksgiving. This prayer changes Jonah's perspective and understanding of God's call and presence in his life. How might you rephrase this prayer for yourself today? What might you bring before God to seek help, say sorry, and express thanks?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, keep me willing to pray “sorry” when I mess up, “help” when I face problems, and “thank you” for all the ways you accompany, forgive, and love me through life. Amen.

Wednesday, June 28

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-3

The LORD's word came to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.” And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.)

Observation

After a pretty unpleasant escape (the fish “vomited Jonah onto the dry land,” 2:10), Jonah made his way to Nineveh. Nineveh was a principal city and last capital of Assyria. Their empire had defeated and scattered the tribes of Israel. This means that people felt about Nineveh the same kinds of fears and distaste that “Moscow” brings to Ukrainians today.

Application

Jonah has made clear his strong desire to avoid Nineveh, and honestly – I can understand it. I would not want to enter the gates of a community that had caused such harm. I am less brave, and more risk averse than that! (And sometimes, that's okay too!) Still, even while dragging his feet, Jonah found ways to trust God and carry God's message out into the world. Are there people, places, or situations that feel difficult for you to carry God's message? How might God encourage you to trust that God will make a way?

Prayer

God of all creation, help me to love others as you do. Help me to build a world that embodies your mercy, love, and grace. Make me willing, trusting, and courageous in following you. Amen.

Thursday, June 29

Scripture: Jonah 3

The LORD's word came to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.” And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.) Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant. When word of it reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, stripped himself of his robe, covered himself with mourning clothes, and sat in ashes. Then he announced, “In Nineveh, by decree of the king and his officials: Neither human nor animal, cattle nor flock, will

taste anything! No grazing and no drinking water! Let humans and animals alike put on mourning clothes, and let them call upon God forcefully! And let all persons stop their evil behavior and the violence that's under their control!" He thought, Who knows? God may see this and turn from his wrath, so that we might not perish. God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn't do it.

Observation

Once in Nineveh, Jonah preached a short message (only 5 words in Hebrew!) warning the people to get their act together. They took seriously Jonah's words: changed their behavior, fasted, and wore mourning clothes. Seeing this, God "stopped planning to destroy them and didn't do it" (v10).

Application

I'll be honest, this chapter always challenges me. Imagine being Jonah, and after finding courage to speak to your "enemy" -- they listen! I'll bet Jonah was ready for a fight, or at least for their "evil ways" to continue... but instead, they repented. Is this hard for you, too? It makes me wonder: how might God help me give others opportunities, grace, and forgiveness, in the same spirit as God does?

Prayer

God, you are lavish in grace and quick to forgive. Help me to grow and become more like you. Make my heart eager to give second chances, to forgive, and to see others as your beloveds. Amen.

Friday, June 30

Scripture: Jonah 4

But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "Come on, LORD! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, LORD, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live."

The LORD responded, "Is your anger a good thing?" But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, "It's better for me to die than to live." God said to Jonah, "Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?" Jonah said, "Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!" But the LORD said, "You 'pitied' the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Observation

Turns out we aren't the only ones who struggle with God's response. Jonah was mad, too! (4:1) But I love Jonah's prayer, "This is why I didn't want to do this. I *knew* you are merciful and compassionate" (4:2). How quick we are to be angry when God shows others the same compassion and grace that we require!

Application

In chapter 2, Jonah praised God for God's mercy. And now, Jonah is angry for the same mercy being shown to others. Humans are funny, aren't we? But isn't this relatable? God used a shrub to answer Jonah's question, to show Jonah how God continues to feel love and compassion for Nineveh, even when they strayed. Some of us might know this same heartache God feels, for someone we love to find their way back. Some of us might be that lost city (or sheep or son, as other parables tell), who are searching for our own way back. Jonah reminds us again, that God does not say "except" when it comes to forgiveness and grace. Rather, God's mercy and grace is for all people.

Prayer

Merciful and loving God, thank you never placing boundaries on whom you will love, how often you will forgive, or far and deep your mercy will be found. Amen.

Saturday, July 1

Scripture: Acts 15:1-2 (3-21)

Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we've received from Moses, you can't be saved." Paul and Barnabas took sides against these Judeans and argued strongly against their position. The church at Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and several others from Antioch to go up to Jerusalem to set this question before the apostles and the elders. The church sent this delegation on their way. They traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling stories about the conversion of the Gentiles to everyone. Their reports thrilled the brothers and sisters. When they arrived in Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed them. They gave a full report of what God had accomplished through their activity. Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, "The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses." The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. After much debate, Peter stood and addressed them, "Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. God, who knows people's deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus." The entire assembly fell quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through their activity. When Barnabas and Paul also fell silent, James responded, "Fellow believers, listen to me. Simon reported how, in his kindness, God came to the Gentiles in the first place, to raise up from them a people of God. The prophets' words agree with this; as it is written,

*After this I will return,
and I will rebuild David's fallen tent;
I will rebuild what has been torn down.
I will restore it
so that the rest of humanity will seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who belong to me.
The Lord says this, the one who does these things
known from earliest times.*

“Therefore, I conclude that we shouldn’t create problems for Gentiles who turn to God. Instead, we should write a letter, telling them to avoid the pollution associated with idols, sexual immorality, eating meat from strangled animals, and consuming blood. After all, Moses has been proclaimed in every city for a long time, and is read aloud every Sabbath in every synagogue.”

Observation

The book of Jonah showed a prophet who wanted God’s mercy for himself (and his people) but found it “utterly wrong” that God showed mercy to foreigners in Nineveh. The gospels were clear that Jesus wanted the good news of God’s gracious love shared with “all nations.” In Acts 15, some of Jesus’ first followers struggled with that. The apostle Paul preached Jesus’ good news to the Gentile (i.e. not Jewish) Mediterranean world. “Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we’ve received from Moses, you can’t be saved’.... Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses’ (Acts 15:1, 5). James, Jesus’ half-brother who led the Jerusalem church, quoted the Old Testament prophet Amos to show that God had always wanted his love to reach all nations.

Application

Pastor John Ortberg wrote, “Two of the most powerful words in the human race are *us* and *them...*” Jesus breaks these barriers, crosses lines, and reminds us that we are all beloved children of God in need of God’s mercy, love, and grace. We so easily get this wrong. We use our unique and God-given diversities to make divisions of “us” and “them.” For Jonah, God’s love was only for *us*, not *them*. Search your heart, asking God to identify your “us” and your “them.” Then pray that God will help you learn from Jonah that God calls you to live beyond those human distinctions.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, help me to love as you love. Help me to heal divisions and harm caused, and instead celebrate the present diversity in your creation, and seek unity with others. Amen.