

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans

November 24, 2019

“Crisis over Conversion”

Jonah 3: 10 – 4: 11

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Have you been angry recently in your life? If you haven't been angry, can you remember someone else getting angry in your presence or against you? If not, or if so, can you remember the results of the anger? What were those results? There is such a thing as righteous anger, where Jesus got so angry with the moneychangers in the Temple, that he upturned their tables and those who were selling animals for the sacrifices, likely at a high profit (Matthew 21: 12-17, Mark 11:12-19, Luke 19:45-48, John 2:13-22). Most often, if not all the time, our anger is not righteous anger, it is a different kind, often connected to our childhoods.

My close friend who lives in the US says that he has recognized when he snaps at one of his disabled children he has adopted, he recognizes his father's own impatience at that point, where he says he saw his father wreck a cupboard or drawer, when he got angry. He didn't hurt his children physically, but he did destroy inanimate things. My friend tries hard to not snap back with an angry verbal response, but doesn't always succeed.

My father had the ability of the quick retort. He could often have a cutting comeback that my mother labeled a “TT.” This is not a German sports car, mom called it the “tongue torture.” And she received it many times. Our family was not extraordinarily unsafe, just another middle class family going through what we went through. But when it comes to our hearts, these are the kinds of events and relationships that shape our heart space. And this heart space is what Jesus is addressing as we come to Him.

I am grateful for Jonah. He wasn't perfect. He had troubles trusting God and rebelling against God just like I do, and like you do. He made mistakes, bad ones, before God; just like I do, and like you do. He had negative feelings, that he didn't know what to do with; just like I do, and like you do.

But the beautiful news in this book of the Bible, is that God keeps on pursuing, and Jonah keeps on being honest. You noticed that the book of Jonah ends with the prophet angry, doubly angry in fact. What do we do with that?

Lest we skip to the end of the sermon, I am just giving your sub-conscious mind a few minutes to reckon on that piece of the puzzle. Let's go back to the end of chapter 3, verse 10. What do we find there?

We find that the Lord saw how the Ninevites responded to Jonah's message, and he relented from destroying them. The Assyrian Empire gained further power and strength and destroyed a number of other civilizations afterwards. And they too were destroyed 100 to 150 years later in the later part of the seventh century BC, after Assyria brutally destroyed and deported the people of Samaria, that is, of the Northern Kingdom of Israel during that time. Assyria paid for her crimes down the road.

But right now when Jonah is preaching, God relents and does not destroy the Ninevites, as Jonah had warned, because the people repent and turn to God, with their actions and their lives.

#### Jonah 4:1

And we know how Jonah responds. Is he happy that God has spared this city of more than 120,000 people? No. He is not. He is angry. Jonah had used his prophetic gift in the beginning, a gift from God, and he knew as a prophet that God was going to forgive them. And so he prays to the Lord. Please note the positive side of this difficult and complex story. Jonah has a close, intimate relationship with God. He speaks to Him regularly, honestly and openly. (v. 2)

Not only that, but Jonah has a correct theology. Hear what he says: (v. 2c) I knew/know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah understands that it is perfectly right for God to forgive this people in line with His character and their repentance. So what is the problem?

Jonah's argument is that Jonah knew all this while he was still home in Northern Israel. What sense does it make to send a prophet to a people doomed to destruction and rightly so, when the outcome will be, not what the prophet preaches, that is, doom and gloom and destruction for the city and all its inhabitants: both people and animals. Why go through pursuing Jonah and getting him to preach, when in the end, God knows that He will forgive them at this time in history, and so does Jonah. Why not just forgive them and get the whole thing done without wasting Jonah's time? Did you follow that? Do you think Jonah might be thinking that?

Yes, Jonah is angry. Plus, some commentators feel he was looking forward to the destruction of the Gentiles, the non-Jews, just as we might feel some sense of vindication, if someone who bullied us was beat up or worse himself.

Jonah may have had some mental health issues. He certainly displayed mood swings on this particular mission trip. He encourages the sailors to “throw him into the sea,” remember that from chapter 1, verse 12? He likely couldn’t swim, but we don’t know. Now Jonah is so angry, he wants God to take his life. (4:3) These are almost the exact words of Elijah the prophet, from 1 Kings 19:4.

Jonah is fed up with what? His calling? God’s actions? Not seeing what he wanted to see happen? And how about us? Are you fed up with your life right now? Are fed up with God’s call on your life? Or are you upset with God’s actions? Is God not doing what you want Him to do? Have you ever been so upset with God, that you ask Him to take your life? What does God say to you about that? He wants your best, wants to love you, wants to be patient and kind with you too!

So God’s kind response comes to the prophet Jonah “Is it right for you to be angry?” And we can hear James the apostle from his epistle say, “for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God...” (James 1:20 NASB translation) Anger often comes about when a person believes something has gone wrong, a justice issue, and usually I pay the consequence for that thing which goes wrong. Over the years, I might get angry if I am trying to get quiet enough to write or prepare one of these messages, and right when it is going well, a bunch of texts or emails or phone calls or immediate needs for visitation happen. I wonder if I’ll finish the message. I have almost always finished the messages. I know that. And life happens when you are trying to concentrate on a project. I get that. I’m simply trying to talk about a justice issue. When I want to be alone, people need me. When I don’t want to be alone, those I want to be with are not available. Loneliness happens that way. Or so it seems.

Jonah meanwhile is very upset with God. I think he thinks God is going to change His mind and wipe out the people anyway. That’s why he gets a patio chair and sets himself up above the city of Nineveh (the east side, 4:5) to watch the fireworks, or so he hopes. But it’s a hot summer day, so he makes himself a little lean-to shelter. It’s not much, but it’s good enough to protect him a bit from the sun for watching the destruction that he is certain will come.

Jonah 4: 6 – 8

Now we don't know how long Jonah sits in that patio chair. It may be a long while. And while he sits there, God allows a gourd to grow. Now we don't know what this plant, part of the reason the newer NIV simply translates "*qiqayon*" as a "leafy plant." This word is only used in Jonah. Other translators call it "*rizinus communis*" (Lisowsky, p. 1259), or the "castor-oil plant." A translation from the 2005 TNIV calls it a "gourd." So let's just imagine it was a plant from the squash family, and if you've planted cucumbers or squash or pumpkins or the like, you know the greenery grows fast in the heat, and fairly large leaves. Then the flowers come and the fruit from that. Likely, it was a gourd-ious plant. So Jonah took not only to its shade, but also comfort from seeing it grow over several days, perhaps longer. Again we don't know how long all of this is playing out. He trained the vine to go up over the lean-to and the big leaves were shading his head. He particularly was enjoying that part, when all of a sudden the fortunes reverse. The weather patterns change. The Bible tells us God sends a scorching east wind. And while we need to be careful, we can say God does influence the weather, when He wants as He wants. It happened with the storm on the Mediterranean Sea, and now near what is now called Mosel, Iraq.

That beautiful plant gets an insect of some kind, again, something you gardeners will know all about, and before you know it, the vine is being eaten, and the insect apparently goes for the eating the parts of the plant that makes it so big and luscious. And it is gone. The plant dies. It is hotter than ever. Now Jonah is really in despair. He once again asks for God to take his life. Are there things in your life, that if they were taken away, would you feel same way? Would feel like you want to die?

What are those things, activities, relationships? Today is a good day to give them back to God. Pray something like: "Lord, take my garden, my hobby, my music, my friendships, my travel plans, my finances, my family concerns, my health concerns. I give them back to you today, now."

Back to Jonah. Angry Jonah, Suicidal Jonah. How could Jonah grow so attached to that plant in such a short period of time? How can we grow so attached to our pets, our routines, our homes, our expectations? Jonah did grow attached. So do we. God teaches Jonah that the plant was a gift to him for a while. Jonah did even less than a gardener does to receive the shade and joy of that plant. He loved that plant and what it did for him. God says, "Shouldn't you love people like that too?" And please note that the number of 120,000 I've been using for the population is there in verse 11.

Now I personally know and you may personally know prophets or church workers that might not like people, teachers who don't like children, doctors who don't like patients, and engineers who don't like building things. But God says, we should agree with Him, to be compassionate toward others, who are hard to love. We should have a missiological spirit to reach many people groups, sub-cultures and minorities. But do we want to love them and care for them. I am afraid my love is sometimes low and my anger high. I am trusting God for our future and loving those who I do not agree with, loving enemies, loving family members that are hard to love. I hope you are seeking to do the same. The book of Jonah ends with Jonah still angry, and God still carrying out his mission, patient with Jonah, trying to teach him. Will we be teachable in these days of complicated denominational questions, congregational decisions and personal callings? I trust and hope that we will be teachable. I trust that God will keep teaching us from the Scriptures which are essential, faithful and reliable in every way.

Give your worst, most complicated, most hopeless issue to God, right now. Let Him speak kind words to you. And please listen.

Let us pray.