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October 29, 2023

“Forgiving God”

Sermon on Jonah 3:3-4:10

Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” <sup>5</sup> The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup> When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. <sup>7</sup> This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. <sup>8</sup> But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

<sup>4</sup> But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. <sup>3</sup> Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

<sup>4</sup> But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

<sup>5</sup> Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant<sup>[a]</sup> and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. <sup>7</sup> But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

<sup>10</sup> But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. <sup>11</sup> And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

God’s forgiveness is even more radical than we can imagine. Most of the time that is good news. But when the mercy of God loves people beyond what is reasonable-or how about when the mercy of God extends to people who are not reasonable-that makes me hold it against God. If you hear nothing else today hear that-the love of God is more all encompassing than we can imagine and more all encompassing than we would like.

I want to invite you to think of the person, group of people, or institutions for which you hold contempt. It might be the IRS-sorry if you happen to be an employee for them. It might be the federal government as a whole, it might just be Republicans-or it might just be Democrats-though not likely in this congregation. Think of an individual that just riles you up-that just disgusts you-who is appalling, imbalanced, vile, repulsive, annoying, and you just as soon you never ever have to see their face or ever hear from them again. Wouldn’t that be wonderful.

THAT is how Jonah viewed the Ninevites to whom he was called to preach repentance. The story doesn’t tell us why-and the story is not to be taken literally. It is symbolic of the relationship between a reluctant prophet and God and between the mercy of God and humanity.

We know the story from the beginning don’t we? We didn’t read the most well known part of the story when we say Jonah we usually don’t just say the story of Jonah. We say Jonah and the Whale. He got swallowed by a really big fish if we go by the Hebrew-this was his reaping of a consequence for not following God’s call to preach.

I wonder how the Presbytery would’ve responded had they asked a candidate “Why did you answer the call into ministry?” and they said “Because I didn’t want to get swallowed by a really big fish”. It’s as good a reason as any. Might have them referred back to that psyche evaluation again.

I want to invite us though to take a look at this book as a satire of the call to ministry and the nature of the radical love of God. This is what it bears testimony to more effectively than the more surface message-do what God says or else you'll get punished. That's what we normally take away from it. Follow God-or else.

Jonah at the beginning of the book is called to go and preach to Ninevah-for them to repent.

Instead he gets on a boat and runs the other way to Tarshish. God then causes a storm to come upon the boat that's carrying Jonah and they want to cast lots see whose to blame for the storm. It's Jonah. There is some humor throughout the book and the first bit of it is here.

Jonah is called-then he goes the opposite direction-perhaps human nature-the act of a rebellion, but he is running away from the call rather than toward it. That happens throughout Scripture and I myself when I was called kept trying to do anything else but ministry. Are you sure God? Are you REALLY sure? 24 years later and it seems like the right path so far.

The next bit of humor-to be clear, not hardy har har fall over funny, but just a wink wink nudge nudge say no more say no more-the sailors on the ship who worshipped OTHER gods, paid homage to the One True Living God. Adonai-Yahweh when Jonah didn't. They threw him overboard to save their own lives, but they prayed for an received God's forgiveness for the act and they built an altar to the Lord-Jonah didn't worship-the heathens did. The prophet said no thanks. The heathens said "Praise you God".

Then Jonah is thrown into the ocean apparently to drown-but he is saved by the really big fish. It swallows him and he is trapped inside it. From the belly of the fish we have a Psalm like prayer that finally arises from the reluctant prophet. It is such lovely Hebrew poetry. Listen for this imagery.

<sup>[a]</sup>From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. <sup>2</sup> He said:

“In my distress I called to the LORD,  
and he answered me.

From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,  
and you listened to my cry.

<sup>3</sup> You hurled me into the depths,  
into the very heart of the seas,  
and the currents swirled about me;  
all your waves and breakers  
swept over me.

<sup>4</sup> I said, ‘I have been banished  
from your sight;  
yet I will look again  
toward your holy temple.’

<sup>5</sup> The engulfing waters threatened me, <sup>[b]</sup>  
the deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

<sup>6</sup> To the roots of the mountains I sank down;  
the earth beneath barred me in forever.  
But you, LORD my God,  
brought my life up from the pit.

<sup>7</sup> “When my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered you, LORD,  
and my prayer rose to you,  
to your holy temple.

<sup>8</sup> “Those who cling to worthless idols  
turn away from God’s love for them.

<sup>9</sup> But I, with shouts of grateful praise,  
will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make good.

I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”

Elegant, beautiful-rhythmic and lyrical. Then.

<sup>10</sup> And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Poetry, then BLECH.  
Humorous

Now we get to the portion of Scripture that we had as our passage.

Jonah goes into Ninevah-and delivers an 8 word sermon-forty more days and Ninevah will be overthrown. World's shortest sermon-world's most over the top response.

Their response is immediate and far reaching. The king declares a fast. He sits in sackcloth and ashes-which is the traditional ancient middle eastern way of mourning.

The king declares a fast not just the people but for the livestock? What's a goat ever done to displease The Lord? It's hyperbole. Meant to be funny. A fast for everyone!

Here Jonah reveals some of his character. When we are not at our best, we can sometimes be like Jonah. Gonna get back to the people, person, or institution that raises ire inside us. Jonah HATED Ninevah. He didn't want God to love them-because he hated them. Do we hate anyone? Maybe we can just admit to being hate adjacent?

As Anne Lamotte says If God hates all the people you hate you've created God in your image. God is a forgiving God-forgiving of even those we would write off as not worthwhile or whose humanity we may question-some people just seem beyond any human redemption-but God loves that person-those people, just as much as God loves you and me.

I relate to Jonah in this case-I don't care for God loving those that I do not. So we may find ourselves having to forgive God for being who God is-love-forgive God for having this radical love for those we just as soon write off as beyond redemption. I have a hard time with this-I imagine I'm not alone.

We may not be as bold as Jonah in his disdain for Ninevites. Some on the far right though-whew. Make me pray a lot more-Lord forgive them, because I cannot. Please help me Lord Jesus to love my enemies. That's what Jesus commands in his Sermon on the Mount. Love your enemies-pray for those who persecute you.

Thankfully there is grace for when we fall short of this ideal-but it is call to love that remains-will we be like Jonah and run from our call to love? Will we pout about who receives God's forgiveness? Or will we engage in a grown up way of loving-one that involves more than just feelings-it involves loving thoughts-loving actions. We are called to be willing to accept and love the very ones who would reject and hate us. I say it in nearly every sermon I preach-it is sometimes hard to love the people we LIKE-let alone love our enemies. Only with God's amazing grace can we begin to practice this. Will we let God off the hook for this? Or will we hold it against God and rebel when it comes to this radical inclusive love.

Will you and I include those who would exclude us? What does that look like? Hard to say. I imagine it primarily involves not denying the humanity of those who oppose our worldviews. We are invited to see each person as bearers of the image of the divine. Created in God's image-yes even THEM. Or to them even US. Important to note too that the Ninevites repented. They sought redemption-God changed God's mind about the calamity he was going to bring upon them. So do we only forgive those who seek forgiveness? Do we match the willingness of God to change our mind about who we would condemn? Sometimes I've heard it said we need to be willing to accept an apology that was never offered.

Jonah pouts about God's nature. He has to forgive God for being who God is.

God teaches him a lesson. Jonah complains about it-"Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." That's good news-that's the gospel. God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. If you don't hear anything else today from me-hear that. That's good news.

Jonah knew this about God-do we? Slow to anger, abounding in love. That is the nature of the creator of the universe. This might not be a surprise to you all-I know it is a progressive church-you all are pretty far left of center which I love and its refreshing, so maybe you were raised with an image of a loving God. I hope so. I trust that the mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting.

Two caveats-one is Paul asks the question should we sin all the more so that grace may abound? MAY GNOITO! By no means! We don't do that. Do not put God to the test. Just know we're covered. Another caveat.

Jonah is pretty melodramatic. <sup>3</sup> Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

HE WOULD RATHER DIE THAN GOD LOVE who he loathes.

Where do we find ourselves on this spectrum? Do we hold it against God for loving who God loves? Can we forgive God for having a nature that we don't fully understand? Only with the help of grace can we extend grace. Only with this radical inclusive love can we then accept the God who loves all people.

Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.