

The Gospel According to Jonah: God Repents
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Jonah 4:1-11
Exodus 34:1-7
Psalm 103:1-13

Dear Friends, I greet you in Jesus' name.

For the past couple of weeks we have been dipping into the Old Testament, which is (of course) the Bible Jesus read. It is still relevant to us today, in part because it provides the foundation for the New Testament. And we have found that Gospel – that is, the good news of God's mercy – is found in the Old Testament as well as in the New. Just think back to the lessons we have heard this morning. In every one of them, we have heard the very same description of God: that he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. We still use those words today in our liturgies and hymns. The book of Jonah sparkles like a jewel with the Gospel message – *except* that Jonah himself, doesn't seem to be too happy with that message – especially when applied to the enemy. Why should God be good to the bad guys? That's the question behind this book.

So let's take a quick look at the story so far. God has given his prophet, Jonah, a message for Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. Assyria is the enemy of Israel, and Jonah doesn't want to go. So he runs away from God, going in the opposite direction, getting on a ship headed for Tarshish, on the west coast of what we now call Spain. But God sends a storm that causes the ship to swamp. Fearing shipwreck, the pagan sailors learn that Jonah is trying to run away from the very God who made the sea and the sky. But despite heroic efforts, they find they must throw Jonah overboard in order to save the ship. In doing so, the seas immediately grow calm and the sailors turn to the Lord in faith. The good news in that chapter is that even if you run away from God, God will never run away from you.

Jonah, meanwhile, is given a reprieve when a great fish swallows him. In the belly of the fish, Jonah turns to God for help and God causes the fish to vomit Jonah out on dry land. And in the very center of the book, Jonah proclaims the essence of the Gospel: "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (and to no other god).

In chapter 3, Jonah gets a re-boot. (Pause) Repeating the words of Jonah 1:1, the "word of the Lord came to Jonah..." "Go and preach" to Nineveh. This time, Jonah obeys. But as you heard last week, Jonah preaches a rather terse, 8-word sermon: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." Notice that Jonah preaches *only* destruction; he says *not one word* about repentance. But the people repent! They recognize their sin, are sorry for it, and experience a change of heart. They beg God to have mercy and forgive them. And – guess what? God has a change of heart too – he has compassion on them and does not destroy them. God changes his mind! We will return to this later.

At this point, we enter today's reading. Now, as you read this story, you might have said that the story could have ended at the end of Chapter 1, when the storm calmed and the sailors found faith. That would have been a good ending. Or, you might have found a satisfactory ending when, in Chapter 2, Jonah was saved from drowning and confessed that "salvation comes from the Lord." What a great confession of faith. That would be a good ending.

But still – the story goes on. In Chapter 3, Nineveh repents and God is merciful – wouldn't that make a great ending? Sorta ties up all the loose ends, doesn't it? Nope. *God is not done yet.* Because Jonah is a piece of work. God still needs to sort out his grumpy and angry servant. Because Jonah is ticked. *Not fair!* Jonah cries. *They don't deserve it!* In fact, Jonah says, "God, just take my life now. I'm done! I am so done!" You can just see the little cloud of anger hanging over Jonah's head as he stomps out of the city.

Jonah has a point. Why *should* good things happen to bad people? (That's really the question that this book addresses – much as the book of Job asks the opposite question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?") Jonah just can't – or won't – accept the idea that Nineveh might be spared. It reminds me a lot of the story of the older brother in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. Remember? The younger brother, who has totally wasted his inheritance on parties and prostitutes has returned home, hat in hand -- and his father forgives him! Puts on a party for all his friends, fatted calf and ring on his finger -- the whole nine yards.. The older brother is livid. Why should that good-for-nothing get a party while he -- the one who has done everything right, stayed at home, doing all the work -- never has any fun. So angry! Fuming. Just like Jonah. So Jonah camps out on the edge of the city to watch, in the faint hope that God will destroy it after all.

Ever been there? Have you ever seen someone else get a pat on the back – someone who had not deserved it, someone who had really messed up – while others (maybe you) had been slaving away without so much as a thank you? Probably we've all been there sometime. Gut level, we feel that people should get what they deserve -- and it goes both ways. A criminal deserves jail. A nice person deserves a good life. So when an accident happens to a nice guy we say, "He didn't deserve that." And the implication is, "What was God thinking?" (It sheds doubt on God.) Beware. Deep down, we tend to identify with the good guys and point the finger elsewhere. But what if you aren't the good guy? What if the older son is just as guilty as the younger?

A pastor relates how a friend – a good man, a well-respected judge – called him with some bad news. "I've just been to see the doctor. It's cancer. I have 6 months to live. Pastor, I'm afraid to meet God. I need your help." His diagnosis had apparently made the judge see himself differently -- at heart, a sinner. And you can't fool God. So the pastor tried to explain God's mercy to him, how Jesus had taken our sins to himself; and how we, in faith, could now appear before God as if we had never sinned. Hearing this, the judge was appalled. "But that's not fair! It isn't even decent. We would never deal with wrongs and offenses in the lowest court of the land in this shabby way." He was offended that the guilty should get off scot free – even when he knew that, before God, *he* was now the guilty party. That an innocent man should bear the penalty of the guilty was, to him, intolerable. He declared, "Such an act would undermine the whole system of law and we would be left with moral anarchy." That, my friends, is the real offense of the cross. The Gospel is, truly, an offensive proposition.

Can you grasp just how radical God's act of mercy is in Christ? God is radical! -- gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love. But it's needed. Oh, it's needed. Do we deserve it? Absolutely not! We -- like Nineveh -- deserve justice -- and there's the rub. But the incredibly good news is this: God is *merciful*.

Repentance is the key. Nineveh repented, despite the harsh, 8-word sermon that proclaimed only destruction. They gave up their evil ways – turning around 180 degrees – and that's the definition of repentance. To feel sorry. To change your mind. To turn the other direction. That's what the people of Nineveh did – *and that's what God did, too*. The Hebrew word for "repent" (*nacham*) is used for God as well as for the people of Nineveh. God's heart was touched and he repented. Did God repent of sin? Of course not. God repented of the destruction he had intended. God changed his mind and went the other direction. *Really? How can God change his mind??* We aren't told. The Bible is interested, not in probing the inner workings of God, but rather in showing again and again his desire to pull us back into relationship. He showed mercy instead of anger. Repentant human hearts – sorrow for sin, desire for change – turn the key in God's heart.

God's character is fully revealed at the beginning of this chapter. There had been a hidden conversation between God and Jonah in Chapter One, which I mentioned two weeks ago. Now, in chapter 4 Jonah prayed to the Lord saying:

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.

Jonah knew, all the time, that God would turn and forgive. Compassion is central to God's nature. Unlike Jonah, God is slow to anger. Jonah tried to prevent God from showing mercy; an act in futility if there ever was one.

Jonah is, indeed, the story of why good things happen to bad people. And if you are in Jonah's shoes, or if you are the older brother in Jesus' parable, the one who does everything right, you too might be angry. But my friends, the problem is: our shoes are not all that clean. The younger brother sinned in obvious ways, but the older brother has, too – albeit in more subtle forms, such as pride or self-righteousness. God's forgiving nature is good news to both brothers. To all. He doesn't want, finally, to kill and destroy. His aim is always to turn and to forgive; but that door can only be opened by you, through confession and repentance. God's aim is pretty consistent: it's all over Scripture, from the Old Testament where God says:

Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live! (Ezekiel 18:31-32)

... to the New Testament where we hear this:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16) It's Gospel. It is *the* Gospel.

So what about the ending? Well, the story isn't over. *God isn't done yet!* It's left open-ended, just like the story of the older brother. Did the older brother repent, or continue to let his anger smolder? Does Jonah repent – or continue to pout? We don't know. Why? Because the story goes on, to include you and me as well.

My friends: here is the Good News according to Jonah.

- Salvation comes from the LORD, and from him alone.
- When you run away from God, he doesn't just let you go.
- God repents too – moving away from anger towards mercy.

- God will do whatever he has to do
 - to lead you to repentance
 - to restore relationships
 - to heal you and make you whole.
- When you finally stop running, he sends you out to carry his message of love and grace to the next guy.

The Good News according to Jonah shouldn't surprise you. Because we Christians know the Good News according to Jesus – the God who dies for you, the God who gives you life. This Good News leaves the action in your court. So what will you do with a love this great? How will you deal with a God who, again and again -- and again -- reaches out with mercy? The story isn't finished yet.

Prayer.