United in Repentance

A meditation on Jonah 3: 1- 10 and Mark 1: 14 – 20

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church January 24, 2021

What is not to love about the book of Jonah, a book full of mysteries and delights! A storm at sea, a man swallowed whole by a giant fish(whale?); donkeys, cows and sheep walking around in sackcloth; an entire city agreeing together that they want to be renewed in the ways of justice and peace, God using a worm to teach a theological truth. And through it all we have the character of Jonah. Who is he? Is he Jonah the reluctant prophet? Or Jonah the defiant prophet? Or Jonah the terrified missionary?

Jonah’s book is very short – three chapters – take a few moments this week and read the whole story. You won’t be disappointed. If we were here together I would invite you to help me retell it now…but here’s the recap.

One day God calls out to this man, Jonah, and tells him to go to Ninevah and tell the people that God has *seen* them, is saddened by them, the ways they are living. “Tell them,” God says, “they need to turnaround, repent.”

Jonah doesn’t got to Ninevah, but instead hops a ship for Tarshish, which is in the opposite direction. A storm comes up, and the sailors, terrified and wondering whose god is angry with them, look to Jonah. In a moment of honesty, he confesses that he is running from God, and though they try to row back to shore so that he can start again, he insists they throw him into the sea. Sinking down beneath the water, Jonah is swallowed by a fish. He spends three days in its belly, praying to God, singing a song of praise to God. “Deliverance belongs to the Lord,” is the closing line of that prayer. Remember that line, “Deliverance belongs to the Lord.”

The fish, tired of carrying this undigestible weight in its belly, spits Jonah out upon the land. But God is not angry with Jonah for trying to run away. God doesn’t shame Jonah or punish Jonah. God the patient parent, reminds Jonah that he has to complete his assignments before he can watch TV. This time, Jonah, having survived a storm at sea, and a near drowning, heads to Ninevah. He walks into the midst of his enemies, and says, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” That’s it. That’s the message! The people receive the message and begin to fast. They put on the mourning clothes of sackcloth (goat’s hair). A fascinating thing happens next: the king hears about the repentance of the people and he joins them. The king decrees: “they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change their mind; God may turn from anger, so that we do not perish.”

Just as God had seen their violent ways, God now sees their repentance. God spares Ninevah, which makes Jonah furious with God…Jonah says to God, “you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” In other words, Jonah says, “What a wasted trip! You were never going to punish them, so I’m the only one who suffers!” Jonah did not want to see his enemies redeemed, and he had no desire to participate in their redemption. God has knocked Jonah from the judgment seat.

Jonah represents all that we are when we allow our hatred to go unchallenged. And I realize some of you may have never known hate – have neither received or given hate. Most of us have at some point. Maybe it has been broadly defined, hatred for a group of people, as the way Jonah would have felt about the Assyrians. Maybe it has been more narrowly specified, directed at political leaders within our nation or beyond. Maybe it has been even closer to home.

Jonah’s rejection of God’s mercy shocks us…until we hold up the mirror.

To be fair, Jonah was given one of the most challenging jobs in Hebrew scriptures. The other prophets – the big names like Isaiah and Jeremiah – were called to speak to their own people, the Hebrew people. They preached of God’s love for them and their need to return to God’s ways. But Jonah? God sent Jonah into the belly of the beast, the capital of the Assyrian nation, Ninevah. God sent Jonah to the Assyrians, their enemies, to offer them mercy. It’s one thing to consider someone your personal enemy, but it’s another to experience an entire group of people as your enemy. The Assyrians were Jonah’s enemies, his neighbors’ enemies, his family’s enemies. How many people would he betray if he were to go into the midst of the enemy? Who among his friends would understand? How many would abandon him upon his return? *If* he returned? Imagine Jonah contemplating the potential outcomes upon delivering a message of condemnation to his peoples’ enemies:

* Possible and hoped for outcome – they would laugh at him and run him out of town
* Probable and feared outcome – they would be offended, outraged, and would kill him on the spot
* Highly unlikely “only God could imagine this” outcome – they would accept the message, and thank Jonah for all he sacrificed to make the journey

Weighing the options, and not wanting to die, Jonah ran from God and right into the arms of merciful sailors. When the storm was threatening to break their ship apart, when the sailors feared the gods and the punishment they were enduring, even when they learned that Jonah believed he was the cause of their suffering, they did not turn against him. These sailors attempted to steer their ship back to shore in the midst of the storm so that Jonah would not drown. They tried to save this total stranger at risk of their own lives. Jonah’s first experience of undeserved mercy.

Falling short of their attempt, the sailors had to trust Jonah to the sea and to his God, and through their bizarre encounter with Jonah, they came to believe in the God of Israel. Jonah is the consummate accidental missionary. He preaches not with his words or his acts of love, but with his bold mistakes and reluctant obedience that reveal the mercy of God.

Jonah’s second experience of unmerited grace is, of course, that fabulously hungry fish. That fish, that swallows him up and allows him to use her belly as a prayer chapel. And mercy upon mercy, she doesn’t just dump him in the sea, but spits him out upon the land so that he doesn’t have to fear the water once more.

Soggy and smelly and maybe a little repentant, or at least resigned, Jonah enters Ninevah. The city took three days to cross from edge to edge. Jonah walked for one day, and preached the shortest sermon ever recorded, “In 40 days you will be overthrown! In 40 days you will be overthrown!” The mystery is that this man, covered in bits of undigested whale meals, seaweed and sand, wasn’t gently taken by the hand and led to a physician. The mystery is that unlike other prophets, he didn’t speak in poetic language of God’s sorrow over the people, and of God’s longing for justice. The mystery is that this people had enough self-awareness, enough vulnerability that it didn’t take a poet laureate, an Amanda Gorman, to stand before them and finally wake them up. They didn’t ignore the Jonahs until finally God sent a Gorman along to prophesy: “If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy and change our children’s birthright.” ([Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem 'The Hill We Climb' full text (cnbc.com)](https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/20/amanda-gormans-inaugural-poem-the-hill-we-climb-full-text.html)

Maybe it was his bedraggled appearance, maybe it was his overwhelming fishy odor, or maybe it was the fear in the eyes of one who has known suffering, but in the words “you will be overthrown” they heard the message that they would be the cause of their own downfall because they had forgotten mercy, had abandoned compassion, had ignored justice. These Gentiles, these outsiders beyond the boundaries of God’s covenant with Israel? God loved them. Could Jonah?

The Ninevites take repentance seriously. They fast. They pray. They wear the clothes set aside for grieving: goat hair clothing and ashes. They put on the mourning clothes that prophets wore in their sorrow, and they become prophets to the king. The king sees the sorrow of his people, the king stands as witness to their repentance, and he joins them. He endorses their commitment to the truth by adding his power to their commitment. (Wouldn’t that have been amazing to experience these past 4 year, as we grieved and mourned?) Since he can’t tell them to fast and mourn - they are already fasting and mourning - he decides to take it over the top: let the *animals* fast and mourn as well. While some of you have had success at dressing your pets, I don’t know that any of us are brave enough to put goat skin clothing on the donkeys and sheep! (And what about the goats? If sack cloth was actually goat’s hair cloth, do the goats get a pass?? But I digress.) Perhaps the king believed that all creation should mourn together. Perhaps the king believed that injustice affects all of creation and their animals could be a reminder of this truth. A wise leader, perhaps? Or a leader who had been awakened? A mutual awakening? The gift of life in authentic community. And so the Ninevites were united in grief, united in renewal. What an amazing day for Ninevah. And by the grace of God, they did not kill the messenger…they did seem to forget about him, or maybe he just ran away before they could thank him.

Or maybe Jonah didn’t want to be thanked because he resented a mercy that could extend to his enemies. If he could not hate the Assyrians, how would he define himself? What would he say to the people back home??

Only the day before, his voice had echoed in the whale’s cavernous belly, “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” Those words he had shouted with a thankful heart, now hung heavy around him for he had seen that deliverance does belong to the Lord. Jonah saw that he had been knocked from the judgement seat and so he chose to sit on the ground, outside the city. Alone. When he could have been with the Ninevites, hearing their truth, learning their story. If he could have only seen that God was offering him a better seat, a mercy seat.

What will we learn from Jonah’s story? What will we carry with us?

Can we move off the judgement seat and onto the mercy seat?

Can we desire mercy for all God’s people?

Could we, too, be missionaries of grace? Even if only accidentally? Even if very clumsily?

It is the God of mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love who knocks us from the judgement seat, who does not allow us to stay at home, hatred festering under the surface, but sends us out of our comfort zone to become agents of redemption for all people, even our enemies. Unlike Jonah, we do not have to do it alone and with fewer fish.

Thanks be to God. Amen.