

King of Glory Lutheran Church – September 23-24, 2017

Year A: Pentecost 16 Jonah 3:10-4:11

Slow to Anger...

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God can forgive whoever is repentant – God will forgive any one. We may not ever understand it, but that's not the point.

Most of us know the story, or at least the famous part of the story. We remember Jonah, that Old Testament story of the guy who gets swallowed by a whale – or that's what the child's story Bible said. But the story book doesn't tell of the intrigue, the confusion, the religious conversion of sailors, of an evil city's repentance, or a prophet's confirmation of the belief he holds most dear.

Yes most of us know the story of Jonah. God tells the Hebrew man Jonah that he needs to go and preach to the Ninevites because their 'wickedness has come up before me.' Without pause or explanation, Jonah runs the other way. He literally goes in the opposite direction God tells him to. On a boat trying to flee from God, a great storm arises. Believing in pagan gods, the other sailors say to Jonah, "Who are you? Who do you worship? Why have you brought this destruction upon us?" They throw him overboard in hopes the sea might calm down and then, yes, God saves Jonah by having a fish swallow the prophet.

After three days and nights in the belly of the fish and a fervent, 'Save me, oh God!' prayer, Jonah gets vomited up on the beach. Lying there stinky with grains of sand in his hair and mouth, God again says to Jonah, "Go and preach to the Ninevites."

And in the shortest sermon ever recorded, just eight words, Jonah preaches. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Who were these wicked people of Nineveh? Why did they need a prophet's word from the Lord? Nineveh was the capitol of ancient Assyria. The Assyrians (non-Jews) were known by this time as bloodthirsty, cruel and ruthless. They were a threat to the tiny nation of Israel. And in 722 bce, the Assyrians destroyed God's people in the Northern Kingdom with great acts of violence. They hauled their captives into exile, forced people from war into slavery. The people of Nineveh, like the rest of the nation were true to form. Other Biblical prophets describe Ninevites as wicked, idolatrous, careless and full of lies.

But God knew they were ripe for a change of heart. Jonah didn't know that. And now after the people of Nineveh repent – that's when we get to hear why Jonah didn't want to go preach to them in the first place.

"I knew it! I knew you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. I knew it. I guessed it from the beginning that this might happen. You, God have mercy on our enemy. You have forgiven them."

The prophet pouts. He gets angry that his message was heard. He's...upset, saddened, confused, confounded, and perturbed. Well, he's human. And often we humans don't understand the ways of God.

Remember last week, we talked about the why's and how of our forgiveness of others? This week, Jonah reminds us of the why and how of God's forgiveness of those we see as 'other.' Those for whom we might think do not deserve God's forgiveness.

Prophets in the Old Testament aren't usually so successful. Typically, people didn't listen to prophets. They stay stuck in their ways and God had to keep urging a prophet to keep preaching. "Tell the people the Lord says this! The Lord says that." Jonah's story is completely different! He preached once – only eight words! "Only Forty days!" he says. Quickly the news spreads and the King orders a fast and a royal decree. All the people, even the animals, the cows and the sheep too, put on sackcloth and ashes. They repent. Listen to these next words. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." (Jonah 3:10)

God did not slay the evil city. God didn't do it! These were God's chosen people that the Ninevites had slaughtered. How could God turn away from passing judgement? Not fair! Not right!

No. It isn't fair. For God is slow to anger, abounding in love, and ready to relent.

At one level that is the God we all want. "Don't cut me out, God. Have mercy on me. Lord in your mercy."

Yet, when it comes to God forgiving people we don't like, or the others who aren't like me or even our enemies, then we begin to want to put limits on God's mercy.

"How can you forgive *them*, God?" "He *deserved* everything he had coming to him." We want a God who has our sense of justice. When people have done wrong, we want retribution that fits our sense of justice. "She got probation? No way. She deserved 5 years."

When God sees Jonah is angry, in compassion God gives Jonah a bush so he has some shade. Then in quick succession, God sends a worm to attack the bush, and then a hot wind so that Jonah is left with nothing. In fact he loses all his perspective and in a melodramatic moment says, "It is better for me to die than to live!"

Jonah has lost the wager. He is caught by what he believes and the reality of the truth before his eyes. He bet that the words of the ancients were true – that his God was compassionate. That his God was merciful – even over and above being just. He bet that God would save the city, and when Nineveh repented, that's exactly what God did.

Slow to anger, abounding in love, ready to relent.

What about the law in Exodus 21? “An eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound?” What about those words, God? Ah...Jesus then said, “You have heard it said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, “Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;...I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good...” (Matthew 5:38-45)

So what about ISIS who has taken over whole villages, killing women and children and forcing men into their organization? Families have been separated. Humans have been used as shields in war. Can God forgive them? What about Kim Jung-un seemingly intent upon this continuation of rocket testing? Do we want God to forgive him? What about the Bashar Assad regime in Syria committing war crimes against humanity the likes of which have never been seen before? Turning against that nation’s peoples has left an entire country in ruins and turned 5 million people into refugees. Could God forgive Bashar Assad and his supporters? According to Jonah, if there was repentance, it appears the answer just might be, yes.

It doesn’t make sense. It’s not logical. The Assyrians, the Ninevites relentlessly punishing God’s chosen people and yet God has mercy. Is God capricious? Does God change God’s mind just on a whim? Is God steadfast and true, beyond our understanding, merciful and full of grace?

How do we feel about that? What do we think about that? Do you want a God who has mercy even over and above just judgement? Yes! Absolutely! For me! For my sins! For us! I want a God who has mercy and hears our prayers. But for ISIS? For Jung-un? For Assad? For terrorists? No way! Bahumbug! I think I’ll find a bush and pout.

In scripture, God reminds us God’s ways are not our ways. To Moses, God says, ‘Tell them I am who I am.’ To Job, God says, ‘Do you give the horse its might? Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars?’ (Job 39:19, 26) To the disciples, Jesus says, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.’ (Mk 4:11) To Isaiah, ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand. Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes...so that they turn and be healed.’ (Isaiah 6:9-10)

This very week on Friday evening, September 29, through Saturday, our Jewish brothers and sisters will celebrate Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is also known as the Day of Atonement. It is the holiest day of the Jewish year. Its themes are atonement and repentance, signified by 25 hours of fasting and prayer. Many Jews will spend the hours in synagogue worshipping and in prayer.

For the afternoon reading on Saturday during Yom Kippur, this story of Jonah will be read. As Maya Berstein writes,

We read Jonah during the Mincha service because we *are* Jonah at this point in the day. We have been functioning in the realm of belief that our prayers will lead to certain outcomes; that is, after all, the purpose of Yom Kippur! And yet, deep within us, in the desire to return home to sleep in our beds, there is the doubt, the anger, the knowledge

that we can never understand how this world works, and what is the point in trying? We read Jonah to be reminded that this tumultuous, contradictory, difficult space is, in fact, the space of prayer and possibility.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg ([“The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious,”](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jonah-yom-kippur/)) writes, “The enigmas that enrage and sadden Jonah are not riddles to be solved. They remain; God invites Jonah to bear them, even to deepen them, and to allow new perceptions to emerge unbidden. In a word, to stand and pray.” And so we, Jonah-like, enter the synagogue as he entered the fish, and as we stand in the dark, unseeing, we call out to our Creator. We do not answer these riddles; rather, we immerse ourselves in them and let them take us over. (<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jonah-yom-kippur/>)

The story ends with God’s questions to Jonah. Those questions go unanswered. “Are you angry about a bush that you didn’t grow when there are 120,000 people who don’t know right from wrong? And the pigs and cows too? How shall I not be concerned for them?”

A prayer mentor once said, “Worship the God you know and the God you don’t know.” The instruction was to invite a pray-er to enter into all of God’s greatness and God’s character with an open heart and mind. Parts of God would be understood, parts would not. Yet worshipping all of God, rather than only the portions of God we find acceptable open us, humble us and keep God outside of our labels and boxes.

At the end of the day, slow to anger and ready to relent doesn’t make sense at least not in human terms. But perhaps this side of heaven, it never will. Most of us know the story of Jonah. Most of us don’t know or understand the ways of God.

Lord in your mercy...