Pentecost 16 Proper 20

September 20, 2020

Jonah 3:10-4:11

One morning during seminary, I woke up with no voice. I felt well enough to go to class. I’d write things down for a classmate to say so I could participate. It worked pretty well, except for one thing.

It was my class on preaching.

By resting my voice for a couple days, I managed to stand before my classmates and deliver a sermon. But a big part of me wished that I could have gotten away with a sermon like the one Jonah preached to the people of Nineveh: “40 days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

That’s all he said. No mention of God, no mention of the possibility of mercy, no call for repentance.

And yet it remains the most effective sermon ever preached. The people repented with such enthusiasm that they even dressed their animals in sackcloth, the traditional garment of the repentant, and God declared that they would be spared the prophesied punishment.

But I don’t call Jonah the world’s worst prophet for no reason.

Prophets generally didn’t have a favorable response to what they said. Most of the time, they were ignored or treated with animosity. And yet they persisted. It’s easy to imagine the prophets in prayer, complaining to God that the people don’t listen to them, so why were they even bothering? Yet their faith told them needed to be obedient to God’s command to speak the word of the Lord to the people.

Jonah, however, when he hears the word of the Lord, tries to flee from God’s presence. He doesn’t protest like some of the prophets, declaring that he’s not qualified. He just heads in the opposite direction of where God tells him to go.

And then, when his message – which, again, doesn’t mention God *at all* – leads to God extending mercy, Jonah has a hissy fit.

To understand why Jonah was so angry, we need a little history lesson. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were the neighborhood bullies who created the most powerful military empire the world had seen to that time. They relished their reputation for cruelty toward their enemies.

Over the span of 250 years, from 890 to 640 BC, the Assyrians used force against their neighbors 108 times, including, as we read in 2Kings, invading Israel and taking people into captivity.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Israelites had good cause to fear and hate the Assyrians.

We hear Jonah’s frustration in our text today: “I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” And he’s angry because God has proven him right.

It’s entirely possible that Jonah was afraid that the repentance wouldn’t stick, that the people would return to their evil ways. And that’s an understandable fear.

But this is also about Jonah’s unwillingness to entertain the notion that God might forgive people that Jonah calls enemies, unwilling to witness God extending mercy to people who have enslaved and killed the Israelites and people of other nations. Jonah was unwilling to consider forgiveness of the people who had embraced cruelty the way the Assyrians had.

He was so bitter toward the Ninevites that he built a tent so he could comfortably watch God destroy them. And when God was merciful, Jonah was so angry that he couldn’t imagine living in a world where God would do such a thing.

Jonah knew God was merciful, but he didn’t like it when it benefitted his enemies.

For which, Jonah may well be the most relatable person in the entire Bible.

Every time we thank God for forgiving our sins, but harbor hopes that God will punish those who have wronged us, we behave like Jonah.

The story of Jonah ends with a cliffhanger. We never get his response to God’s question, “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

I think that the reason it’s left like that is so that we are invited to imagine what Jonah would have said, what he would have done next. Would Jonah have given up his anger and bitterness?

I have to say, based on what we learn about Jonah in this short story, I don’t have much hope for him. After all, the *fish* and the *worm* were more obedient to God than Jonah was.

The book of Jonah is placed among the prophets, among stories of people like Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos. But Jonah is more like the anti-prophet. He only grudgingly obeys God’s instructions, and then sulks when the people repent.

Jonah’s anger toward the Assyrians blinds him to the possibility that God loves them, too, and wants to see them repent of their cruel and evil ways.

How can we call ourselves disciples if we believe that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love -- if we depend on that for ourselves -- but we’d be fine with God not behaving like that toward our enemies? When that happens, we have not only judged them, but we have condemned them.

And that is not ours to do.

Ultimately, Jonah wants God to behave the way *he* thinks God should behave, not in accordance with God’s very nature. He doesn’t want God to forgive them, even when they repent. He wants God to punish them, so they feel the kind of pain that they’ve inflicted upon others.

Jonah would have been perfectly fine with God denying God’s most *fundamental attributes* – love and mercy – in favor of destruction.

The story of Jonah reminds us that God is not looking for blind or grudging obedience. God is looking for hearts ready to be conformed to God’s own, transformed by God’s extravagant grace and mercy. Hearts open to being molded into the image of God’s own heart – slow to anger and overflowing with love and compassion.

May it be so for us.

1. *The Culture of War: Invention and Early Development* by Richard A Gabriel, in *Connections*, Jonah, Proper 20, Anathea E. Porter-Young [↑](#footnote-ref-1)