Epiphany 3

January 24, 2021

Jonah 3:1-10

I happened to read the story of the Exodus earlier this week. There’s a phrase in it that always catches my attention.

As Moses and Aaron plea with the Pharaoh to allow the people to leave so they can worship God, we’re told Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not listen to them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Not just once, but multiple times.

As uncomfortable as it may be to admit it, sometimes our hears are hardened against others.

I think that’s what we see in happening in Jonah. Jonah’s heart is hardened against the Ninevites. He does not want to see God show them even a speck of mercy.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were the bullies of their era, expanding their empire in all directions, including Israel. Neighboring nations could not know peace as long as the Assyrians were nearby.

Despite Jonah’s hardened heart, God called him to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh.

I don’t think any of us would blame Jonah for being reluctant to be anywhere near the people who had been so cruel to their neighbors and so set on taking their land.

But there’s more to it than being afraid to go anywhere near the Ninevites. Jonah did not want to entertain the notion that God might consider mercy toward the Assyrians.

Only after God gives Jonah a 3-day time out in the belly of the fish does Jonah relent. Grudgingly, Jonah walks into the city of Nineveh and delivers the worst sermon ever preached.

Five words in Hebrew. None of which are “God” or “mercy.”

But his sermon was so effective that we’re told the king ordered all the people *and* the livestock to take on the clothing of repentance.

For a people who had been defeated and exiled, the Israelites would have been familiar with bitterness and anger toward hostile neighbors. Indeed, the Psalms are full of pleas that God would deliver the people from their enemies, punish their enemies, and make the people safe from those who sought to harm them.

But the story of Jonah does much more than remind us of the challenges and dangers the Israelites faced because of the expansionist desires of their neighbors.

Jonah reminds us of what happens when we let bitterness and anger get in the way of obeying God.

Through Jonah’s story, we see that God has just as much concern for those we call enemies as God does for us.

God called Jonah to deliver a prophetic message to people Jonah feared and hated — the same sort of message the prophets delivered to the Israelites, encouraging them to repent and worship God, or face punishment for their sins.

Why?

Because God loved the people the Israelites hated just as much as God loved the Israelites.

This story isn’t really about the repentance of the people of Nineveh, miraculous as it may have been.

It’s a story to remind us of our own need to repent, of our own need to let go of the anger and bitterness that can so easily take root in our hearts and keep us from loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The story of Jonah reminds us that, no matter how justified we think we are in hardening our hearts against others, God does not share our opinion. To the contrary, God loves them and hopes that we will repent and learn to see all people the way God sees them.

As the disciples followed Jesus, they would have done well to remember the story of Jonah as they encountered people they may have been predisposed to dislike. Like the Roman centurion and the Samaritans. But, just as God showed mercy to the people Jonah hated, Jesus taught his followers to love their neighbors, including those they called enemies.

Before his ascension, Jesus gave the disciples instructions to go out into the world to share the good news and baptize people. He didn’t say they should only go to people they liked. He didn’t say they should only go to places that felt safe, that felt comfortable.

Each of them, we’re told, left behind work and family. Each of them left behind the comfort and certainty of their lives, to learn how to be Jesus’ disciple.

Most of us aren’t asked to leave our families and homes behind and live an itinerant life, traveling from town to town.

But we *are* called to leave behind the things that distract us from serving God and the things that harden our hearts toward others.

That’s essentially what repentance is. It’s about learning to see all of creation the way God sees it. When we do that, we’re choosing a path that is rooted in trust of God, not ourselves, not worldly things, not false messiahs.

Repentance isn’t just about feeling sorry for what we did or didn’t do. It’s not just about trying to do better the next time. It’s about allowing God’s mercy and love to transform our hearts so that we see other people the way that God does, and learn to love them the way God loves them.

God does not call us to be superheroes of the faith. God calls us to use the gifts we have been given in service to one another. To learn to live peacefully with one another. To seek the well-being of others, including those we are inclined to think less favorably of.

It can be really easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God thinks the same way we do about people when we’ve hardened our hears against them.

That simply isn’t true.

No one is beyond God’s love.

Some people may choose to reject that love, but it is freely and extravagantly and unconditionally offered nonetheless.

God loves the people we love, and God loves the people we’re indifferent about, and God loves the people we don’t like, and God loves the people we hate.

And God’s most fervent hope is that we will learn to love others as we have been loved. To offer mercy to others as we have received mercy. To forgive others as we have been forgiven.

May God’s abundant, extravagant love transform our hearts and minds, and lead us to new ways of understanding the world around us.

1. Exodus 8-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)