

Jonah and God's Appointed Worm
All Creatures Great & Small
Summer Series

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from the pulpit of
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Psalm 145:1-8

¹I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. ²Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. ³Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable. ⁴One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. ⁵On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. ⁶The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness. ⁷They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. ⁸The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Jonah 3:10-4:11

¹⁰When 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.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. ⁶The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” ⁹But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And 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 guess we should not be surprised that this whole book of the Bible ends with a question mark. Biblical scholars have spilled a lot of ink describing what kind of literary genre Jonah is because it is so different from the prophetic material that surrounds it. Their classifications vary to include allegory, didactic story, legend, satire, myth, novella, sermon, short story and folktale. Phyllis Tribble argued this book of the Bible has characteristics of all of those literary forms, and lands on the word *parable* as the most apt description.¹

Like the parables of Jesus, Jonah invites us to engage the narrative in such a way as to find ourselves within the story, to see ourselves reflected in its characters and to discover the truth it reveals about God. As with any good parable, it's not hard to imagine how we inhabit these scenes: with Jonah fleeing his call from God, the sailors fearing the stormy sea, Jonah praying in the dark inside the big fish, The Ninevites turning away from their evil ways, and even joining those silly animals in sackcloth as all of creation stands in obedience to God. Even in its fun exaggerations this parable works as a literary device meant to invite us to self-discovery and to new revelations about the character of God. Last Sunday we saw in Jonah a reluctant, surly prophet, who had - by God's grace - the most successful preaching revival in all of scripture. He preached one sentence to the evil people of Nineveh, whom God was intent on saving, and the entire city, from the king to the animals, turned toward God, fasted, donned sackcloth and begged for mercy. You might think that would be the end of the story: mission accomplished! That Jonah would be proud of his success, headed home to break open some champagne, and celebrate God's abounding grace and mercy. Nope! Instead, Jonah goes off to the edge of the city to bask in his own self-righteousness. He sits under a plant that God grows for him and he sulks all day in the shade of the plant. "Jonah, what are you doing under the plant pouting?" God

¹ Phyllis Tribble, *New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. 7, p. 463 ff.

asks, as if God didn't know. Jonah lets God have it, "I knew you were gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love." You were never going to punish the Ninevites. You know that I hate them, but you sent me to them. They have repented, you changed your mind about their destruction, and now they're not getting what they deserve!

We understand Jonah. It is really irritating when people don't get what they deserve, isn't it? What Jonah cannot manage to understand is that the mercy God shows to them, is the mercy God also shows to Jonah himself.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that this is lovely example of divine humor. Everyone in the story repents except for Jonah. The Ninevites repent. God repents. Even the cows and the goats repent. But Jonah does not repent. He slinks off to the outskirts of the city and hopes that God will decide to destroy it after all, because he cannot accept the possibility that God's idea of justice does not coincide with his. Here's the divine humor: "God appointed a worm to eat the tree God had given Jonah for shade." And in his continued pettiness, Jonah grieved the death of the plant, with no happiness in his heart for the whole city of people and animals he'd won over to God!²

Most of us have come to believe, I hope, that God is a God of steadfast love and abounding mercy, but just like Jonah, we would rather feel entitled to God's grace for ourselves than to see it showered upon others, especially those we have judged as undeserving. That is why the Book of Jonah ends with a question. Were it a text arriving by phone it would end with a question mark, an exclamation mark, a laughing so hard I'm crying smiley face, and then a couple of hearts! This ancient parable wants us to remember that God loves the world. God created the seas and dry

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Ninevites and Ne'er-Do-Wells," *Gospel Medicine*.

land, its human inhabitants, its plants and creatures in love. That's why every aspect of the created order, from a big fish to a work, has a starring role in this story, and why – at the end – we are left – not with a simple moral, not with a summary sentence, not with a commandment, but with this question: God asks: “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?”

Friends, we are living in a moment when people are trying to thrive on hating other people. Hatred has become our steady companion in political discourse, in global warfare and international alignments, in surging manifestations of racism and xenophobia, in the language we use to talk about “the other” whether that be a migrant family trying to escape violence and poverty, or a neighbor on the other side of the aisle politically. As Lutheran pastor, Mary Anderson, has written, “Everybody Jonah had ever lived with, worked with or had lunch with seemed to see the world in the same way - everybody, that is, except the God of the universe.”³

The parable of Jonah shows us this is not a new phenomenon. But hatred, resentment and revenge are counter to the will of God. There is something about anger and enmity and hating one another that eats away at our very being, and slowly destroys us. Again, this book of the Bible ending with a question is asking us, “Don't you see?!” God is always more merciful and generous in love than we are and because God so loves us, God urges us to be more merciful and generous in love ourselves.

Here's a modern-day story of how the God of Jonah keeps calling people to a greater good. The war in Gaza has divided New York City's Jewish community in ways without precedent, rupturing friendships that have spanned decades. When Rabbis need guidance

³ Mary Anderson, *The Christian Century*.

with navigating the tension, they turn toward Rabbi Jill Jacobs to lower the volume. Jacobs runs an organization whose mission is to advance human rights in this country, in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories. Through their work, these Rabbis are calling for a release of the hostages, and also an end to the war in Gaza. “People are screaming at each other in slogans,” she says. Her job is to keep the human story front and center. Rabbi Jacobs writes: “The Jewish community is shattered by what happened on October 7th, mourning friends and family, still worried about people held in captivity, and frightened for those in Israel who are displaced, deployed, and living under rocket fire. We are also shattered by the deaths of civilians in Gaza, including thousands of children, and by the humanitarian crisis unfolding there. Right now, like Jacob and Esau before their father we are being asked to choose a favorite. To choose one side in this conflict to bless with our support. But that is a false choice.” She goes on: “We have enough compassion, commitment to human rights, and ability to hold nuance in our hearts that we can see the humanity in every person living on this piece of land and bless them all for a better future.”⁴

You know, I think that’s why God appointed that worm to take down the shade tree over Jonah. It was one last attempt to teach him, and to show us, that we would do well to spend less energy trying to get even and waiting until others get what they deserve. If God is not willing to level some punishment against those who deserve condemnation, then why do we delight in condemning others? That is precisely why the story of Jonah ends with a question mark, so that we can figure it out for ourselves. So that we can see that God has given us enough compassion, commitment to human rights, and ability to hold nuance in our hearts that we can see the humanity in every person.

⁴ Jill Jacobs story from “Six New Yorkers Who Made the City a Better, Cooler, Fairer Place in 2023, The New York Times, 12/29/23, and quote from T’ruah website.

Thomas John Carlisle ends his little collection of poems on the book of Jonah with one called “Coming Around” which goes like this:
And Jonah stalked to his shaded seat and waited for God to come around to his way of thinking. And God is still waiting for a host of Jonahs in their comfortable houses to come around to God’s way of loving.⁵

AMEN.

⁵ Thomas John Carlisle, *You Jonah!*