

Reflection on the Scripture: Jonah 3:10-4:11

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

So here we are. We didn't want to go to Nineveh, in fact we booked it out of town going the other way. Only there was that storm. Then the big fish, the whale thing. That was honestly unpleasant, but when we were chucked up on shore, well, there we were, in Nineveh. And the only thing to do was get it over with. No one ever listens to prophets, so we went a third of the way through the city, saying, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' (Jonah 3:4). And wouldn't you know, they listened and repented. Everybody, king, cattle, everybody. So we bailed. Went out into the desert, found a good vantage point, built a little shelter for ourselves, nothing too elaborate, and sat back to watch the show. We wanted to be out of the way when God started destroying Nineveh. Only God won't stop talking at us, and nothing is getting destroyed except us in this wretched sun, and we just want to die.

You know, that's the point of the book of Jonah. To give us a cranky toddler of a man to laugh at because he's so incredibly over the top in his grumpiness. We all remember the whale part of the story, but that's just three lines.¹ If this were a normal prophet who goes to tell people to repent, the whole story would end when the city repented. Although, normally the prophets tell people to repent and no one does.

This crazy little story, with this hilarious main character, who is so peevish, who yells at God when he's angry, *I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing* (Jonah 4:2). No one should have to put up with mercy and abounding love from their God.

We laugh at him because he's so over the top. We laugh at him, and something cracks open, and we catch a glimpse of ourselves. Perhaps that's why the Jews read the book of Jonah on the Day of Atonement, when everyone is called to make right their transgressions. Because cranky little Jonah is the best guide to how we fail to remain right with each other and with God.

When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah boards a ship and heads for Tarshish, in Spain, at the exact opposite end of the Mediterranean. Jonah disobeyed God's command, yet Jonah doesn't seem to notice there's no lightning

¹ James D. Smart, "The Book of Jonah: Introduction," vol. 6 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 874.

bolt, no wrath at all. God pursues Jonah with persistent love.² God doesn't even let Jonah drown in the storm. And it never seems to cross Jonah's mind that the pagans, the sailors on the ship make every attempt to save him from harm at all costs – they act more like God than he did.³ Even the fish was more obedient than Jonah, when God tells the fish to vomit up Jonah on the land, it did as it was told.⁴ Jonah says he knows God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but he doesn't seem to notice when all that forbearance and love is directed right at him. Just like us, when we don't notice.

The Assyrians, whose capital city was Nineveh, were brutal enemies. They killed and destroyed their way to a huge empire that they then taxed to support their armies for still more empire building. The fall of the northern kingdom of Israel had been traumatic for the whole country. The Assyrians who lived in Nineveh were Jonah's enemies. No one in Jonah's community was going to argue that they should be allowed to repent and be forgiven. They had done the unforgivable. So Jonah resists going to Nineveh and when he's basically dropped on their shore, he does the absolute minimum, then goes up to get a good seat to watch God smiting the city. And when that destruction doesn't come, Jonah asks to die. Hatred of the enemy has become so fundamental to Jonah that when their destruction is not going to happen, the desire for vengeance means life is robbed of all meaning.⁵ Just like us, when our enemies don't appear to suffer.

God doesn't give up on Jonah. Jonah's got his little hut set up to watch the destruction of Nineveh. God makes a bush spring up to give him more shade. And then a worm causes the bush to wither. Jonah is ripped about the loss of the bush, way more upset about that than the destruction of the city. God points out how much more upset he is about the loss of the plant than the loss of the city and all the lives within it. Just like us, when our comfort is disturbed.

Jonah says that he has always known that God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing. And we would say the same thing. But what he misses, what we miss, is that that means God is in relationship,⁶ with us, with our enemies, with the natural world.

² Todd M. Hobbie, "Proper 20, Pastoral Perspective, Jonah 3:10-4:11" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 76.

³ Hobbie, 76.

⁴ Hobbie, 76.

⁵ James D. Smart, "The Book of Jonah: Exegesis," vol. 6 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 892.

⁶ The idea of this section of Jonah underlining the nature of God as relationship comes from a wonderful commentary by Christopher Davis, "Commentary on the First Reading: Jonah 3:10-4:11", Working

When did Jonah need the shade of the bush the most? When did the people of Nineveh need God the most? Why can't Jonah draw the parallels? Because Jonah is unwilling to extend the benefits of relationship which means Jonah will lose the benefits that come through relationship when he needs them the most. The people of Nineveh see their own wickedness and repent. Jonah never sees his own wicked heart, that allows him to find compassion for a plant but not for people. God is focused on that blindness and is still trying to get Jonah into relationship with his enemies.

Everyone knows that everything called for the elimination of Nineveh: the law called for it, prudence called for it, morality called for it, politics and economics called for it, survival of the fittest called for it.⁷ But there was One who saw something different, something more, and far more precious – the God of relationship saw another possibility.

And to be sure we saw it, and saw all the possibilities which surround us, the chance to walk away from nationalism, and racism, and sexism, and homophobia, and nativism and all the other ways we choose to protect our own comfort by damaging and diminishing the relationships we have with each other and with God, God gave us this story about this cranky little prophet.

So here we are. Are we ready to repent, or does God need to go get the whale and the bush and worm to make sure we learn the lesson about being in relationship with each other and with God?

Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for September 20, 2020, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost", http://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=1301&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 15 September 2020).

⁷ Davis.