

“Compassionate God; Angry Prophet”

Introduction: At the end of our Advent at-home e-retreat I posed the following questions:

1. Does God’s mercy ever make you angry? If so, why?
2. What prejudices are in danger of surfacing when the interests of a nation are put ahead of the Kingdom of God?
3. How would you answer the question with which the book ends? [“Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh...?”]

These are challenging questions because Jonah 4 is a highly challenging chapter! It’s made especially so when we reach the triumphant note at the end of Jonah 3. At that point, we as readers are feeling pretty good. Jonah, you remember, began the book by ignoring God’s call to bring his word to the Ninevites; instead he ran the other way. But God used Jonah’s disobedience to bring a boatload of pagan sailors to faith, and he revealed to Jonah the depth of his grace by scooping him up from certain death by means of a large fish. Jonah then responded positively to the second chance God gave him to go to Nineveh, and, as we saw last week, the result of Jonah’s preaching was mass repentance by the nasty Ninevites who demonstrated the fruit of their repentance through fasting and prayer and changed behavior, a turning from their evil ways, and a subsequent turning by God from his threat of judgment.

But the book is far from over; in many ways, it is just getting to its main point! The beginning of chapter 4 puts it this way: “But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.” Jonah’s reaction to God’s compassion is shocking, to say the least. What an unexpected turn of events! The repentance and faith that every preacher and/or evangelist hopes for had come to pass, but Jonah was not celebrating; he was seething!! As we will see, Jonah was still running from God. And, gratefully, God was still being patient with Jonah. What we learn is not only how far-reaching God’s deep grace truly is, but that understanding this grace, and being changed by it, doesn’t happen overnight; it usually involves a long journey with some fits and starts along with way.

I. The Still Running Prophet

A. What seemed so “very wrong” to Jonah? Well, what seemed very wrong was that God seemed to be letting the Ninevites off the hook. Yes, they had turned from their evil ways, but what about getting what they deserved for those ways? As he conversed with the Lord in prayer, Jonah said something like this: “I knew, God, that you would be true to your character, that you would be gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love,” and that you would not give the Ninevites what they deserved. That is why I never wanted to go in the first place!” And then, instead of remaining inside the city to disciple these new believers, Jonah goes outside the city, makes himself a little shack, and waits and watches. He’s hoping, it seems, that the Ninevites will mess up and that he will be able to witness their punishment by God after all.

B. What’s going on in Jonah’s heart that makes him so very angry? What’s helpful to understand is that there are many ways to run from God. Tim Keller, in his work on the parable told by Jesus called the “prodigal son,” highlights two main ways. One is obvious – we run from God through our disobedience. This is pictured by the younger brother who basically says he hates his father, asks for his

inheritance in advance, and runs off and blows it all in wild living. But then recall that he comes back, and we are then given the wonderful picture by Jesus of the father running out to greet him, giving instructions that this son should be dressed in fine clothes and a big party thrown for him because the son who has been lost has now been found. It is a picture of deep, far reaching grace, of undeserved favor.

B. However, there is a second way we can run from God, perhaps a bit less obvious – it is through our obedience. This is pictured for us by the older brother who was truly ticked off that his younger brother was getting so much love and attention without being punished for his wild living. The older brother was jealous and angry. He had been the one who had stayed, he had been the one who had obeyed all the rules, and he did not want to celebrate his brother's return. The younger brother ran from the father by trying to escape his control through his disobedience, while the older brother ran from the father by trying to take control; he believed that because of his obedience, his father owed him.

C. Jonah, students of this book observe, was both! He was the younger brother in chapters 1-2, running in disobedience from God and then being gracefully rescued. And, he was the older brother in chapters 3-4, obeying God but berating him for his graciousness to repentant sinners, thinking he knew better. This, as the biblical story goes on, was the problem with the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They believed that if people would only obey the law fully, then God, in his Messiah, would come and make Israel great again. God would owe them for their great obedience.

D. But, as we begin to celebrate at Christmas in the incarnation, the fact of the matter is that God, in Jesus, came to live our life and die our death when we had done nothing to deserve it and were totally unworthy of it. When properly understood, our obedience is not to earn God's favor, to get God to do something, but a response of love to what God has already done. In a picture that stands in stark contrast to the response of Jonah we see Jesus, at the end of his life, weeping over the city of Jerusalem. Instead of getting angry at the disobedience of the people in the city, Jesus was desperately concerned for it. And, instead of going outside the city in hopes of witnessing its destruction, he went outside of the city to die on a cross to make possible its salvation. It is this grace and compassion that we see from God time and time again that Jonah could not seem to get his arms around. The fact that God had extended his grace toward foreigners, toward Gentiles, made it all the harder to take in. Loving our enemy, and loving those who are different from us, requires just as much grace, and was just as difficult in Jonah's day, as it seems to be in our own.

Jonah was a bit like that blind man Jesus came across who needed a second touch by Jesus before he could see things clearly (Mk. 8:23-25). If we're honest, we're all like that! Having grace seep down to the level where it will change how we act and respond toward others can take time. We may think we understand it but when push comes to shove, maybe not. Fortunately, we see that while Jonah was quick to anger, God is slow to anger; he is ever patient with us.

II. Our Ever-Patient God

A. We see God's patience at work in God's response to Jonah's meltdown. God responds with some soul-searching questions, and with a parable from nature, all to try and help Jonah to see clearly. "Is it right for you to be angry?" God asks Jonah. This sounds like a question a good therapist would ask! It's a question that is intended to help Jonah become more self-aware. Where is this anger coming

from? God wants Jonah to ponder. It might not be a bad question for us to ponder as well. Does God's mercy ever make you angry? Do you ever think, "that person," or "those people," are not worthy of God's goodness unless and until they shape up? If you find yourself thinking that way, might you have a mercy memory issue? Might you be skating on the thin ice of the unmerciful servant, whose debt was forgiven by the king but who then refused to forgive the debt of another who owed him? Have you forgotten, like Jonah seems to have forgotten, the way God has rescued you from the deep whether you deserve it or not?

B. As Jonah was pondering, God caused a plant to grow up next to his little shelter to help shade Jonah from the hot sun. But the next day, God took the plant away. Having enjoyed the shade, Jonah, again, was ticked, so God, again, asked Jonah to consider his anger. "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" Still struggling with what God was able to give and take away, Jonah said, "You bet, and I'm so angry I wish I were dead." In response, God moved Jonah from the lesser to the greater: "If you cared so much for this plant, know that I care even more for the Ninevites who don't know their right hand from their left, in other words, who are so trapped in their sinful lifestyle that they can't, on their own, make their way out?"

C. This explanation gets us down to the fundamental question of the book: What is God really like? And, given what God is like, what should we be like? God puts it to Jonah like this: "Should I not have concern for this great city, for this hurting and desperate people, even though they are not like you?" This is the question with which the book ends. We never hear Jonah's answer, but Jonah's answer is not the point; how we answer is.