

We will explore the fourth and final chapter of Jonah today, a chapter that is often overlooked or even ignored on purpose. Most want to believe that the story ends with the great news of God's generous compassion on Nineveh. The people have turned towards God and God has turned towards the people. Yet, let's keep reading and hear what happens next! [Read Chapter 4 of Jonah]

As a passenger boarded the Los Angeles-to-New York plane, he told the flight attendant to wake him up and make sure he got off in Dallas. The passenger awoke just as the plane was landing in New York. Furious, he called the flight attendant and demanded an explanation. The attendant mumbled an apology and, in a rage, the passenger stomped off the plane.

"Boy, was he ever mad!" another crewmember observed to her errant colleague. "If you think he was mad," replied the flight attendant, "You should have seen the guy I put off the plane in Dallas!" [Pause]

Anger... a laughing matter? Not so in Jonah's case. Jonah is angry. He is furious with God's change of mind. Jonah wanted nothing less than total annihilation for the city of Nineveh. He believed that they deserved to die, to be destroyed, for their horrendous acts of violence towards Israel and others. Eugene Peterson writes it this way, as an irate Jonah fumed saying, "God, I knew it. I knew this was going to happen! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!" [Pause]

"I knew, I just knew that you were gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Jonah's angry words remind me of a cell phone commercial from years ago where a daughter and mother are yelling at each other. Listen to a sampling of some of the dialogue. The daughter screams, "Why do you insist on treating me like an adult?" The mother screams back, "Because you insist on acting like one!" The daughter continues to yell with an angry voice, "I really like it... why is it always what I want? The mother responds, "Do you have any idea how much money this is NOT going to cost me?" The daughter yells angrily, "I love you," as she stomps up the stairs. The mother responds, "I know you really mean that." I remember the first time I saw this commercial I was totally confused. I was totally confused because the emotion of anger didn't match the message.

Well, Jonah's anger doesn't match the message either. [Pause]

The message of chapter three is that God is gracious. God is merciful. God is abounding in steadfast love. God is ready to relent from giving Nineveh what they deserve!

Wait, isn't this good news? Shouldn't Jonah be happy? Shouldn't Jonah be ecstatic that his prophetic preaching turned a bunch of sinners around? Shouldn't Jonah be thanking God? But, we know from the story that he isn't. He is so mad about God's gracious act that he asks God to take his life. He is so furious at God he wants to die.

Does this sound familiar? It should! Earlier in our story Jonah asks the sailors to toss him overboard because he wants to die! Jonah wants to die, but he always wants someone else to cause his demise! Jonah doesn't want anything to do with this compassionate and forgiving God, especially if God's compassion is directed at his enemies - the city of Nineveh! Jonah is simply furious!

What about you? Have you ever been furious that someone received mercy instead of the punishment they deserved? How about when your parents granted your brother or sister grace instead of the punishment he or she deserved? How about when a co-worker was granted a second chance instead of being fired? How about a criminal that served minimum time for a maximum crime because of impeccable behavior?

Let's be honest with ourselves about Jonah's anger... we all have felt it at some level. We all can relate can't we. Can't you name at least a few people you hope NOT to meet in heaven? A few people you want a hell for so that their horrendous crimes don't go unpunished. A few people you hope will be tossed into that biblical furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth forevermore. I don't have to list anyone for you, because you can probably conjure up your own names or at least some names from history.

Jonah was furious because he believed Nineveh didn't deserve grace. Jonah knew God's character and that's why he decided to run in the opposite direction in chapter one. He didn't want to be associated with any form of grace for the Ninevites. God called and Jonah said "Not me, for your mercy is just too wide!"

Yet, note that God doesn't respond to Jonah by saying, "Stop that Jonah! Get over it Jonah! Don't be angry Jonah." God doesn't even comment on his death wish in this chapter! The divine response doesn't deal directly with Jonah's angry prayer at all. Instead, God redirects by asking Jonah a simple question.

Imagine an angry spouse being asked by an observer "Is it right for you to be angry?" I'm sure you can imagine a number of responses. The spouse might retort, "Of course, it is! My husband doesn't ever listen to me!" "Of course it is, I asked my wife to do something and she didn't do it." "Of course it is, my husband always leaves a mess and never cleans up after himself." Of course it is right to be mad.... You fill in the blank. It makes so much sense to blame someone else for our anger.

It was God's fault that Jonah was angry, at least this is what Jonah thought. Yet, God doesn't address Jonah's anger directly instead God challenges Jonah to figure out the meaning of his anger. God is trying to get Jonah to take responsibility for his emotions, for his angry response to God's gracious act.

I wonder why is Jonah angry? Is it because he looks like a fool for predicting the destruction of Nineveh, but then it doesn't happen? Is it because he didn't receive grace when he desired it in his past? Is he angry because the people of Nineveh hurt his family? What is motivating his anger... that is the question God is asking.

But, Jonah doesn't want to look inside of himself, so he ignores God and walks to a place where he can overlook Nineveh and hope for its destruction.

God, though, is patient and persistent. God has another way to get Jonah's attention. God appoints a plant to make Jonah more comfortable in his waiting. The plant grows overnight and provides shade for the heat of the day. Jonah is pleased with this shady plant. He is content and happy in the shade, as he waits for Nineveh to be destroyed. But then the Lord appoints a worm and the plant shrivels and dies. Next God appoints a sultry east wind to parch and scorch Jonah. Guess what... Jonah is angry once again, so angry that he wants to die!

So, let's recap this fourth chapter of the story. Jonah is angry because God is merciful with the city of Nineveh and its inhabitants (this is a big deal). But, then Jonah is angry because a plant grew and then withered and died (this is a small deal). Jonah gets mad over big and little things, he gets mad over things he has no control of, and he gets so mad he wants die again and again and again! Is it any wonder that God is pressing Jonah, asking Jonah to consider the meaning of his anger?

In our English translations we miss a very important image about Jonah's anger. The Hebrew word translated as "anger" means "to burn." The image is one of destruction, to "burn up" or "consume" human life. From psychology we know that when anger is repressed or suppressed, it "burns" the one who contains it; if it is expressed inappropriately it can "burn" others. Although anger is an inevitable part of the human condition, the divine questioning offers Jonah and all of us the opportunity to better understand our anger.

We have to ask ourselves some simple, yet important questions like these: Why are we angry? What is our anger trying to tell us or teach us? How can work through it or work it through without burning ourselves or anyone else?

Unfortunately, the story of Jonah seems unfinished. There is no neat and tidy ending. We don't know if Jonah's anger consumed him. We don't know if he ever accepts the wideness of God's compassion and mercy for the people of

Nineveh. We only know that God asks Jonah another question after the plant withers and dies.

God asks, "Should I not be concerned? Should I not offer forgiveness and salvation to this great city?"

This last chapter of Jonah challenges us to reflect on the wideness of God's mercy. God's mercy is for the great and the small sin, for there is no hierarchy of sin. Apostle Paul reminds the church at Rome, that "all have fallen short of the glory of God." To the church at Ephesus he says, "You were dead in your transgressions and sins." The church at Ephesus is just like us... we are dead in our transgressions and sins, too. Yet, this is exactly where God meets us, even the worst of us, even those like the Ninevites.

None of us can earn the grace that God offers. Neither the Ninevites nor Jonah was saved by their works nor their acts of repentance, both given the gift of grace by the wideness of God's mercy. Apostle Paul reminds us of this saying, "God is rich in mercy... For it is by grace we have been saved, through faith, it is the gift of God."

God's mercy is wide and its wideness may just make us furious at times. Yet, through this story of Jonah God challenges us to unpack our anger, to determine its meaning and value. Does it turn us into bitter souls? Does it spur us to seek revenge? Does it consume us or destroy others? Or does it provoke us to right wrongs? Anger is not right or wrong, it's what we do with our anger that matters. Through Jonah's story God asks us to honestly evaluate it... what might it be telling us about ourselves, about an issue of injustice, or about ministry that needs to be done? "Should I not be concerned?" said God. What can our anger teach us about God's concern for others, for all others?

As a whole church, I wonder what this final chapter, as well as the whole book of Jonah, has to say to us today.

Let me first look at the whole of Jonah. One of the overarching themes that emerges from this book for me is God's patience as well as persistence with Jonah. God doesn't give up on Jonah, even given his anger and desire to die. God initiates the relationship, calling Jonah to a task. God continually shows up in Jonah's life, even through a great fish, in order to stay in relationship with Jonah. This is good news for us individually and as a whole church. God is concerned for us. God wants to be in relationship with us. We may turn and run at times from God, but God's character is patient and persistent, for God desires to be in relationship with us.

God is not only patient and persistent, God is also gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

What about us? What characteristic do we have as God's people? Do our relationships with each other, across our varied people groups, exemplify patience and persistence? Are we persistent, pursuing ever deepening relationships with each other? Are we gracious and merciful with each other? When misunderstandings occur, do we work to stay in the relationship? When disagreements arise, are we slow to anger and show abounding steadfast love with each other? When tempers flare are we able to reflect first to better understand ourselves, rather than lash out at each other?

These are questions for us as a whole church, but also for our individual lives. For I have no doubt that something will make you and me, and maybe even us, furious at some point in the future. Yet, what will we do with our anger? Will we allow it to burn us or burn others? Or will we seek to understand it and learn from it?

We don't know the rest of Jonah's story. But, we can know ours. My prayer is that our stories will reflect the characteristics of the God whom we say we worship. My prayer is that our story as a church and our stories as individuals will be patient and persistent, gracious and merciful, and abounding in steadfast love for each other and for all others, even for those who we believe are like the Ninevehites. Amen.