



IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU TO BE ANGRY?

Jonah 3:10-4:1

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2020

Deacon Charlotte Downing

Let us pray: Holy One, we thank you that you are a God of love and justice. In this time together open our hearts, minds and spirits to the wisdom of your word, that we may receive new insight for our lives and a new way forward in times of conflict and challenges. In the name of Jesus. Amen

As children, the story of Jonah was a bible story that was fun to hear and tell. The Lord gives Jonah an order he doesn't like. He immediately runs away to a ship going out to sea. The Lord-surprise, surprise!-is not amused. The Lord sends a great storm to scuttle the ship. Frantic activity on the part of the crew follows. Jonah, however, sleeps soundly down in the hold.

The crew figures out the problem. Someone on board has made a powerful god angry. The sailors identify Jonah as that person and toss him overboard. The storm ends and Jonah is swallowed by a big fish. After three days, the big fish spits Jonah out. Then, having learned his lesson, Jonah does what the Lord had ordered him to do. End of story!

It was a pretty good story. It even had a hero I could identify with. I didn't always do what I was told to do. There was lots of action in the story, some of it quite fantastic.

Much later, reading the whole book of Jonah at a much slower pace in a group gave us all lots of time to think about what we were reading. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah. The Lord has a message for him to deliver. And what a message it is: Jonah is to travel to Nineveh, described as a great city, to tell them that their wickedness has come to the attention of the Lord. Now, Israelites knew that Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, was large and powerful. They also knew that it was wicked through and through. The Assyrians were a ruthless enemy. When they captured an area, they scattered the few surviving inhabitants throughout their empire. The peoples they conquered disappeared from history. In WW II they would have been the Nazis. In the Cold War, they were the Russians at their worst. In today's world I guess they would be the drug lords and the terrorists, the racists and haters and fanatics, all who hold life cheap and expendable. No one in ancient Israel would have wanted to give the Assyrians a second chance. Jonah certainly doesn't. He asks no questions. He spends no time deliberating. He immediately rushes down to Joppa to find a ship going in the opposite direction. His purpose is clearly stated. Jonah intends to flee from the Lord's presence, something he would know was impossible if he were thinking at all. But Jonah isn't thinking. All he knows is his hatred. The Lord has no business warning the Ninevites of the destruction to come. Forewarned, they might somehow escape the punishment they so richly deserved. That possibility is unthinkable to Jonah. Jonah does not want the Ninevites repenting and possibly redeemed. Jonah wants the Ninevites utterly destroyed.

The scene shifts to the sea, where the Lord has sent a mighty storm that threatens the ship. The fearful sailors do what they can. They offer prayers to their gods. They

jettison cargo. And where is Jonah while all this is going on? Sound asleep down in the hold. Perhaps he knows better than to offer prayers to the God he is fleeing from. Perhaps he considers death preferable to giving the Ninevites a second chance. The ship's captain is astounded at his behavior.

What happens next is typical of ancient times. The sailors do not see the storm as a natural phenomenon. To them it is a divine act occasioned by someone's sin. They cast lots to see who that someone might be. The lots point to Jonah. The sailors do not immediately throw him overboard but offer him a second chance. They ask him what god he has offended. He tells them he worships the Lord, the God of heaven, who made both the sea and dry land. This answer frightens the sailors even more. They recognize Jonah's God as a powerful god, a god who is not to be trifled with, a god from whose presence one cannot flee.

What are the sailors to do? The storm is getting worse and worse. Jonah gives them permission to throw him overboard. He is willing to sacrifice himself for their sake. He is not, however, willing to confess and repent his sin to the Lord. His obstinate defiance continues. If he is dead, he cannot deliver the message.

The sailors are still unwilling to throw Jonah overboard. They try very hard to row to land. When the storm continues to worsen and they realize they will never reach their goal, they themselves call upon Jonah's God for help. They do not want to offend this unfamiliar god. They do not want to harm Jonah, if any other solution is possible. Finally, they have no choice. They throw Jonah into the sea, which immediately becomes calm. Now even more afraid of Jonah's God, the sailors offer a sacrifice and make vows. The sailors have been in honest dialogue with Jonah's God. They have done what the Lord wanted them to do. They have put themselves in right relationship with the Lord with their sacrifices and vows. They have been the faithful subjects Jonah ought to have been.

The Lord has not given up on Jonah. The Lord provides a very large fish and a belly in which Jonah may reflect and pray for three days and three nights. Jonah offers up a prayer of thanksgiving. He vows that he will do what the Lord has commanded. Finally the fish spits Jonah up on dry land. Not exactly a dignified exit. It is now time for the second act.

The prophetic word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time and now he heads in the right direction. He finds Nineveh large indeed—it would take three days to walk across its sixty miles. However, he walks only one day before he shouts out the Lord's message—just eight words: Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Jonah warns the Ninevites but offers no explanation, no urgent plea, no advice, no hope. The Ninevites believed him. Immediately the king proclaims a fast and the wearing of sackcloth for everyone, great or small, humans and animals alike... no food, no water, covered in sackcloth and crying mightily to God. All will turn away from evil and violence and maybe God will relent and change his mind so they do not perish. There is a real repentance and profound theology put in the mouth of the king who until this

moment had neither experience nor knowledge of the God of Israel . Perhaps this God whom the king doesn't really know is big enough, inclusive enough and compassionate enough to show mercy to the inhabitants of Nineveh. And that is exactly what God does. God saw them repent and changed his mind about the calamity he had said he would bring upon them.

At this point, Jonah is the most successful prophet in history. He shouted eight words and all in a colossal city of violence and wickedness repented and were redeemed. It was a prophetic grand slam. But is Jonah happy? Not by a long shot!

Jonah is not a happy camper. In fact he is really, really angry. He prays to the Lord and tries to justify his actions. He knew that the Lord was a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, ever ready to relent from punishment. He fled because he did not want love, mercy and grace to be given to the wicked Ninevites. His anger at what he sees as God's extravagant love and mercy is so great that he asks the Lord to kill him. Death is preferable to life in relationship with a God who has redeemed what should, to Jonah, have been unredeemable.

God's response is to question Jonah-is it right for you to be angry? Jonah's answer, given in his actions, is a resounding, "Yes, it is right for me to be so angry." God can command his obedience-make him go to Nineveh and deliver the message. God, however, cannot command his compassion. Jonah remains adamant that Nineveh must be utterly destroyed.

Jonah leaves to wallow in his anger. God shows him an expression of his mercy and then the scene changes again so Jonah resumes whining and declaring it is better for him to die than to live. God asks again if Jonah is still angry and he defiantly replies he is still angry enough to die rather than live. God's love and mercy will not be limited by Jonah's anger and thirst for revenge and God enfolds the entire city of Nineveh in divine compassion.

The prophet who wrote the book of Jonah did so after the Babylonian exile when the exiles were returning to destitute Jerusalem still feeling the wounds of war and the humiliation of captivity. Nationalism ran high and resentment and mistreatment of foreigners were commonplace. This is what the prophet addresses in the book of Jonah. God's love and compassion are so great that they extend even to Israel's most bitter enemies. Israel is taught a lesson by an entertaining story that functions as parable and teaches those who hear it by making them laugh and think.

Israel after the Babylonian exile needed to learn this lesson. How about we who live in these times? How willing are we to admit that our enemies are also the beneficiaries of God's love and mercy? What about those who worship in a different way? Or whose skin color makes us uncomfortable? Or who have a political agenda that is unacceptable to us? What about those who live in a manner we consider sinful or slothful? Or who are mean and spiteful? Or who hurt others or engage in criminal activity? Would we be willing to help God bring about their redemption? Or would we be Jonahs lamenting on

the sidelines about the unfairness of it all? Do we reject the good news of who God is for others?

God does what God does. By definition we cannot limit God's love or mercy. It is important that we understand and acknowledge that love and mercy. It is always easier to mistreat those whom you consider to be outside God's compassionate concern. Far too often we look to God for righteous retribution; and when God fails to provide that retribution, we are most happy to provide it ourselves. We have neither God's understanding nor compassion to design and temper that retribution.

It is also important that we acknowledge God's love and mercy because we are often called upon to be the instruments of that mercy and love. When called upon to be an instrument of God's compassion for a bitter enemy, Jonah first fled, then slept, then had temper tantrums. Those are not uncommon responses to the enemies and undesirables we face today. Think of what Jonah could have accomplished if he had followed his eight words of prophecy with teaching and urgent pleading and prayer. Think what might be accomplished if we were more willing to make God's love and mercy known to those most in need of that mercy and love.

The book of Jonah presents two challenges. One is negative: You shall not subvert or sabotage God's love and compassion. The other is positive: You shall become active agents of that compassion and love. Those are the challenges. What will be our response?