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Ugh, I Knew God was Loving

Jonah 3:1-4:11

In preparation for this sermon, I did a little research. Naturally, I had to re-consult one of the main resources on Jonah... *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie*. Despite the Mr. Twisty Twisted Cheese Curls sweepstakes subplot, the movie does an excellent job of retelling the story of Jonah in a kid-friendly but also true-to-the-message way.

In the movie, Jonah is portrayed as somewhat of a celebrity prophet, proclaiming God's message to the cities of Israel. His basic message is, "Treat others well, and God will treat you well." But then, he is told by God to go to Nineveh, those notorious fish-slapping enemies of Israel who cheated, lied, stole, and basically treated all people terribly. His response is, "God, I will go to all the cities of Israel, but Nineveh? No, that is where I draw the line."

And he heads in the opposite direction, to the end of the known world—Tarshish, which we think is in modern-day Spain. (Map!)

Compared with the other prophetic books, Jonah is an odd story. The other books are mostly filled with oracles and judgments against the nations surrounding Israel and the unfaithfulness of Israel themselves. Jonah is not like that; this short book takes on a narrative form rather than a poetic form, and it is one that we love to tell in Sunday School or bedtime stories. It's dramatic and ironic—a prophet runs away from God and is swallowed by a giant fish? An enemy of God repents? A tree spontaneously grows to give Jonah shade and is eaten by a worm?

It's a fantastic story. And like all good stories, there is a powerful message hidden within.

We first need to understand that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the primary oppressors of Israel in the Iron Age. They were known for their brutal cruelty. Their treatment of captives and prisoners was horrific, far beyond the kid-friendly depiction of slapping people with fish. I won't go into detail; you can look it up yourselves. Think of the worst possible treatment of prisoners and foreigners in recent human history—the genocides of Rwanda, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany in the 20th century, and the ongoing ethnic cleansings of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, China, and part of Africa today—yeah, it was like that, but in some ways, worse.

Jonah is told to "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jon. 1:1). So, Jonah does what any good God-fearing prophet would do...

He runs away.

Well, you know, I can't blame Jonah for this reaction, exactly. The chances are, if he went to Nineveh, he wouldn't come back. The Assyrians weren't exactly known for their leniency toward foreigners.

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Of course, we find out later that Jonah also holds a deep-seated hatred of the Ninevites. Quite simply, he doesn't want them to repent. Can't blame him for that, either, not when the Assyrians are single-handedly responsible for the genocide, burning, capture, and destruction of his homeland.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

When I was young and growing up in church, I heard many messages preached about going to the nations and preaching the good news to them. Most often, 'the nations' meant somewhere in Africa. From a very young age, I said—quite strongly, mind you—that “I am never going to Africa!” I don't mean that Africa is a sort of Nineveh, not at all. It's just that it wasn't a place that I wanted to go. I saw photos and videos of what Africa was like, and I think it scared me that there was a place that was so different than what I was used to in my rural northern Alberta world. I couldn't imagine what *that* world was like.

I have since learned that if I tell God, “I am never going to do that,” he will often tell me to do just that. When I was eighteen, I very clearly felt God telling me to join InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's short-term mission trip to Sierra Leone to partner with university students there for six weeks. It felt like an internal *push*, saying, “*You need to go.*”

You can bet that I argued with God. Loudly.

“I don't want to go! I never wanted to go to Africa, and now you're telling me that I need to go??”

I may have been a little whiny. But I knew without a doubt that God was telling me to go. I had a choice—I could go and see what God wanted to show me, or I could run away and refuse, like Jonah.

Well, shoot.

Jonah chooses to run away. As it turns out, God doesn't give up on Jonah so easily. He sends a ship-breaking storm. The sailors on the ship cry out to their gods, eventually discovering Jonah sleeping through the storm belowdecks. They cast lots, an ancient method of divination, and discover that Jonah's rebellion is the reason for the storm. So, Jonah comes up with a solution—throw him into the sea, and God will spare their lives.

It's ironic—Jonah refused to go to Nineveh because he might be killed there, and now he freely gives up his life to save the sailors. And it works. In response, the sailors “*greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him*” (Jon. 1:16). Despite Jonah's obstinance, God is made known to the sailors, and they worship him. Amazing.

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But again, God isn't done with Jonah yet. He provides a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah spends three days and nights in the belly of the fish. From inside the fish, Jonah prays,

*"In my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry." (Jon. 2:2)*

Jonah thinks that he is as good as dead. And who knows? Maybe he did die; the words of his prayer sure seem to say that he descended to the realm of the dead, either literally or metaphorically. He says,

*"When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.
⁸ "Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God's love for them.
⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'" (Jon. 2:7-9)*

Jonah's prayer rises to God, even from the place of the dead. The psalmist says,

*Where could I go to get away from your spirit?
Where could I go to escape your presence?
⁸ If I went up to heaven, you would be there.
If I went down to the grave, you would be there too! (Ps. 139:7-8, CEB)*

If you think that Jonah's words sound very similar to the psalmist, you're right. Jonah cries out to God through the prayers of his people. He knows that there is no place where God is not, even in the place of the dead.

God hears him. The fish vomits Jonah onto dry land (gross), and Jonah picks himself up and begins walking to Nineveh. We read in Jonah chapter 3,

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. (Jon. 3:1-3)

God is persistent. When he has something in store for his people, he does not give up when we run away or when we resist him. He is not bound by our will; he *persists*.

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When God told me to go to Sierra Leone, I had a choice—to obey and participate in whatever God had for me there, or to run away and refuse to let him change me. To stay in my comfortable Canadian life.

What did I do? I argued with God. I resisted. But eventually, I went, and it was one of the hardest and most transformative experiences of my life. God wouldn't leave me alone. He persisted. He changed me, but I had to be willing to be changed.

It appears that Jonah, too, has been changed by his struggle with God. He has relented and admits that God will do as God does, even if Jonah doesn't want to do it. He bows himself to the power and authority of the God who creates storms and calms them, who speaks to him in the depths of the fish, and who is able to bring Jonah back from the dead, or at least the representation of death.

Jonah marches into Nineveh and proclaims, *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."* (Jon. 3:4)

Now, this is a weird prophetic message. Jonah doesn't offer any way out for Nineveh. He doesn't say, "Hey guys, repent and God will save you!" He doesn't even preach in detail against the many corrupt and violent practices of the Assyrians. He simply gives them the timeline and proclaims their destruction.

As far as Old Testament prophecies go, this isn't the best example. Jonah preaches the bare minimum. And yet, the people respond.

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." (Jon. 3:5-9)

This is unprecedented! The entire city of Nineveh, even the animals, repent. The brutal, cruel oppressors fall before the God of Israel—the God of the people whom they have treated terribly—and repent.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. (Jon. 3:10)

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Despite Jonah's reluctance, God used even this mediocre prophetic message to inspire a complete turnaround from the Ninevites. We read this and we are amazed. How wonderful that an entire city repents and turns to God! How amazing that he offers even the enemies of the people of Israel forgiveness! Right?

We would expect Jonah to celebrate with the people. He doesn't. Jonah 4 says,

*To Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. **I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.** ³ Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jon. 4:1-3)*

Jonah is furious. *I knew that you were a loving God! I knew that you are a God of forgiveness! How dare you relent!*

God then spontaneously grows a tree that gives Jonah shade from the hot sun as he waits for the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah is "very happy" about the tree. But the very next day, God provides a worm to chew through the tree and kill it. Jonah again is disproportionately angry.

⁹ God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

¹⁰ But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (Jon. 4:9-11)

That's it. The end. The story ends there, leaving the reader a little shaken and more than a little puzzled.

What is the point?

Why is Jonah so angry? He's not so different from the Ninevites, is he, even though he is a prophet from Israel. He, too, rejected God and was shown mercy by God. When God asks him to show mercy on his greatest enemies in turn, Jonah resists. He's more upset that a tree grown for his comfort was destroyed than he is about the possibility of an entire city being destroyed.

The prophet who was given a second chance refuses to give Nineveh a second chance and longs to die in the wilderness outside of Nineveh rather than see the city spared.

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In the Gospel of Matthew, in response to Peter's question, "How many times should I forgive someone who has offended me?", Jesus tells a parable about a man who owed a massive debt to his master. The man begs and pleads with his master to forgive his huge, unpayable debt. His master agrees and forgives the debt entirely. The man leaves and immediately finds a fellow servant who owes him a teeny, tiny debt. He is enraged that he hasn't been paid back his debt and throws his fellow servant into prison. (Matt. 18:21-35)

The man who had been forgiven much refused to offer forgiveness to others. Did he truly understand the depth of his master's mercy? Did he understand the nature of forgiveness?

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). We are able to receive forgiveness to the extent that we offer forgiveness to others. If we do not offer forgiveness freely, have we truly understood the depth to which we've been forgiven? Do we understand the nature of the mercy we've been offered?

Jonah was a prophet of Israel, the people God had chosen for his own. He knew the ways of God and still resisted God's calling. Israel, too, knew the Law and the Prophets, they knew how to follow God and obey him in love and worship, yet they rejected God time and again.

But Nineveh, upon hearing a chopped-up sermon from Jonah, repented.

Do you see the irony?

The people who heard God's messages week after week missed the point entirely. The prophet who preached the message of God week after week didn't get the point. God's words, they thought, were for them alone. But the people who knew *nothing* about God and heard only a snippet turned to him with their whole hearts. They understood.

The message of Jonah isn't a condemnation of sinful nations; it is a rebuke to the people of God. It isn't even a message about listening to the call of God and obeying it, though I can draw parallels to my experience of being called to Sierra Leone. That's where the parallel stops. I wasn't given a message to the Sierra Leoneans to repent and turn to God. No, *they taught me*, a comparatively wealthy white Canadian woman, much about God.

I returned home with a very different understanding of God; the God in Africa was a living, vibrant God who moved among the people, danced, and healed many sicknesses. I was confronted with instances where I had subconsciously divided my world into 'us' and 'them.' It humbled me, the way that I had considered myself superior to others just because of where I grew up. I came home, and that realization deepened. There were other places where I had

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divided my world into 'us' and 'them' — 'them' mostly being anyone who grew up, believed, behaved, worked, or looked different than me.

It's tempting to align myself with those who are like me, to proclaim a gospel that protects me and mine rather recognizing the very image of God in every person who is unlike me. It's so tempting to remold others into the image I want them to be rather than opening the doors and saying, "You are welcome, just as you are." It's tempting to call down fire and destruction on my enemies—personal enemies who have hurt me, regional enemies who have different ideologies or beliefs, or national enemies who are destroying the nations around them.

But that's just the thing with enemies, isn't it? When we call someone our enemy, we put them *over there* in a 'them' category. We distance *them* from *us*. We haven't understood Christ's forgiveness, who gave his life for *us all* so that we could be part of his family.

God's justice on the Ninevites wasn't to crush them. It was to welcome them into the family of God. That's real justice. It's not vengeance. It's not retribution. It's not saying "I told you so" when your spouse comes home with seven cavities after having not brushed his teeth as you repeatedly told him to do (that's not a weirdly specific example or anything). It's not saying, "Good riddance," when a popular teacher, preacher, president, or prime minister is removed from power.

It's saying, as Jesus did, "I love you. I forgive you."

Because if we proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Master and have received his forgiveness for *us* as it has been given to *all people*, how can we not offer the same to all?

Let's pray.