

## **Anger Issues: Jonah**

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on April 22, 2018*

*Based on Jonah 3:1-5*

The story of Jonah is placed in a city called Ninevah. That name may not be familiar to you but it is the ancient capital of a nation called, Assyria. Syria today is a country where the leader, Mr. Assad, kills his own people with attacks of chlorine gas. Well, things were not all that much better in the ancient nation of Assyria. But the book of Jonah says that God still cared about Ninevah – and all the creatures in its precincts – all of them, those innocent as doves and those guilty as sin, and so God looked around for a prophet to go and speak to the people there and God chose Jonah, the son of Amittai. Now Jonah was a Hebrew, a people who despised the people of Assyria.

And God said, “Jonah, would you like to go down to Ninevah and preach one of your hell-fire, stem-winder sermons and invite the people there to repent of their evil ways – how they are violent and attack other nations and how the leaders are abusive even to their own people?”

And Jonah said, “No, choose someone else.” And knowing that a curt “No,” would not satisfy God, Jonah went down to the Mediterranean Sea just north of Tel Aviv to the port of Joppa (remember that city name) and caught a ship. In my favorite novel, *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville says that “with slouched hat and guilty eye he (Jonah) skulked on board.”

Well, Jonah went down to the bottom of the ship and went to sleep. But God wasn't through with Jonah. God hurled a storm, a strong wind like we had here last Monday afternoon, against that ship and it says that all on board were afraid. And so, in a panic, they began to throw things overboard. And then in their superstitious way, they thought: “Maybe there's a guilty-critter on board this ship who made this happen.”

Now, I'm sure if they had interviewed every single person on board they all would have said something like, “Yes, I sinned a whopper a year ago with my best friend's (whatever).” But the one among them, looking the guiltiest of all, was Jonah and he fessed up. And they asked who he was and where he as from, and he said he was a Hebrew and added: “I fear the Lord of Heaven, the creator of the sea and the land,” and then, with great reluctance, they threw him overboard and the seas calmed down.

“And God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah,” it says, and as unthinkable as that is, it saved Jonah's life and three days later, Jonah found himself vomited out onto a beach. And so God gave Jonah another chance, and this time, remembering life inside the intestines of the fish, Jonah agreed. And he preached there in the city of Ninevah, not expecting anyone there to listen, but they did, and there was a national repenting. Remembering the chlorine gas they used or whatever, the city dressed in sackcloth and ashes and it says that even the beasts of the field and the cattle repented. Go figure. And as a result, God said he would repent too, and decided not to destroy the capitol city.

Now, that made Jonah mad as a hornet. And he said to God, “Now do you see why I didn’t want to come here in the first place? I knew you were a God of mercy, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and mercy.”

So, what’s up with Jonah? Well, the interpreter, Fred Craddock says that Jonah has two different theologies fighting in his brain. “Some of us don’t even have one. Jonah had two.” He had the theology we can easily ferret out from the story – that is that he has an “Israel First” theology. This theology puts these following words in God’s mouth - “Of all the nations of the world, Israel alone have I chosen. You are Abraham’s children.”

Jonah was a prophet who knew who was in and who was out, who was for God and against God, who was under grace and who was under judgment. There was the God of WE and the God of THEY and Jonah knew the difference (even if God forgot that himself).

Now, Jonah would preach that kind of sermon sometimes to standing ovations. He liked to preach sermons in favor of Israel that also included curses against Assyria or whatever people his fellow Hebrews currently hated.

Now, there is nothing more powerful, if you love applause, than to preach sermons (or give speeches) that play to the hatred and prejudices of your audience. Draw the people out, appeal to their lowest instincts and say, “those instincts are fine. God agrees with you. White supremacists aren’t so bad. They’re just protecting us from the Mexicans and we all know about Mexicans ....” Well, you know the drill.

Do that and some people will say you are just being honest. They might even say you have conviction. If you shake your fingers at OTHER people and add that God hates them too, I mean, there’s no limit to the numbers of people you can attract to your church or your cause.

Thomas Hardy once said that just as the color of our skin is determined not by the rays of the sun our bodies receive, but by the rays of the sun that our bodies reject, so it is that we are most often known by those things we oppose, more than the things we embrace.

But there is in Jonah another theology. “I am a Hebrew,” he says, “and I fear the Lord God of heaven who created the sea and the land.” Jonah’s God is more than a God of “Make Israel Great Again.” His God is the God of *all* creation.

Now, what preacher who wants his church to grow would preach that? -- that God loves and cares for *all* creatures, great and small and everywhere? Well, this is the God who conscripts Jonah to preach to Ninevah – he might as well be called to preach against Damascus, or Teheran, or Pyongyang, North Korea.

So, not giving up and hoping God would backslide and destroy Ninevah, Jonah planted himself outside the walls and waited. And it says, “God appointed a plant to grow up over Jonah and give him shelter.” And then, “God appointed a worm to infest it and wither it to the ground.”

Then it says that God appointed an east wind to blister Jonah. And Jonah said he wanted to die because he was so angry that God killed the tree that shaded him -- and God said, "You're concerned about a tree you didn't plant or water?? Don't you realize that In Ninvevah there are 120,000 mostly innocent people that hardly know their right hand from their left and also many innocent cattle? Jonah, I am the God of the entire creation, not just puny Israel."

Well, Jonah knew all that, but he didn't want to preach it, which is why he took a ship out of Joppa in the first place.

You see, if someone preaches inclusivity, people nod and go to sleep. But if you preach the message Jonah wants so badly to preach – that our enemies are beyond forgiveness, well then people say, "Amen, and Alright! And Sic 'em!" This made for such a painful clash inside him that Jonah wanted to die.

Now, if you think this story is just a quaint little story from ancient Israel let me remind you that Jesus and the New Testament writer of the book of Acts, Luke, loved the story of Jonah.

Luke tells a story about a man who is aptly named Simon Bar-Jonah – that is Simon Peter whose full name is Simon Peter, Son of Jonah. God called Simon to preach to a formerly despised people, the gentiles, and, interestingly, God calls Peter when he just happens to be visiting a city called Joppa.

While he's there, Peter has a vision. All these unclean non-kosher animals are let down from the sky into a large California King bed sheet and a voice from heaven says, "Peter, get up. Kill and eat." And Peter says, "No thank you, I don't eat this stuff, it's unclean. Only bad people eat bacon and scallops."

And the voice from above says, "Hey, if I say it's clean, it's clean."

Then with the reluctance of Jonah, Simon Bar-Jonah gets up and leaves Joppa and goes to a place called Caesaria to the house of a Roman military man (as foreign as you can get) who works for the army of occupation in Israel and who wants to be a Christian. It's a remarkable moment. Simon gets the distinct feeling that God accepts the Roman soldier and other soldiers as well.

Acting on that feeling he says. "Does anyone here have reservations about these gentile Romans being baptized?"

Actually what he says is, "Can anyone hinder what the spirit here is doing?" Luke loves that word, *hinder*. Well, no one spoke up and they carried out a mass baptism on the spot.

Now, Simon was called on the carpet for this later. He went back to Jerusalem and other higher ups in the church said, 'We understand that you ate with some gentiles.' Simon said, "Yes, I did, but who am I to hinder the hand of God?"

It's painful to think about, but can you identify here with Simon, or with old Jonah before him? I mean, all of us at some point tend to be tribal. We all of us want lines drawn. We want some people in and some people left out and it's the trickiest thing.

Whatever the line we draw, God comes along and says, "But I am the God of sea, and the great fish, and the wind, the plants, the itty-bitty worms, and the cattle, and the people of color and yes, the Puerto Ricans for heaven's sake. I have a lot of little children that deserve taking care of."

Paul told about Simon bar-Jonah coming to the city of Antioch where they were having a church pot-luck and there were Jews and Gentiles eating together, but they had all become Christians, so those differences didn't matter any longer. But while they were having rack-of-lamb all together and a group of Christians arrived from Jerusalem and Simon Peter, it is said, picked up his glass of lemonade and his plate and he sat down at a separate table with that assembly.

Here, Peter had seen the sheet come down and got the message about inclusivity, He had announced on the day of Pentecost that the promises of God were for all people everywhere, but when the Christian notables arrive in far-flung Antioch having come from the birthplace of Christianity, Peter goes back to practicing the original clannishness he was raised to believe. This is hard stuff. You get that? The pressures on us to revert can be tremendous. I mean, the ideas we were raised to believe are just barely under the surface.

I remember my first personal lesson in this. I was seven or eight and my mother had taught me about civil rights and how God made us all equal on this earth no matter our skin color and then this neighbor came to our house asking if we would be willing to sell our house to a family of color if we ever decided to move and without thinking my mom said, "And have the value of the property in this neighborhood go down?" And there it was. Push had come to shove.

There's a story in Luke's gospel where there was an exorcist not of the band of Jesus. He's an outsider. And the disciples come to Jesus and they say, "We saw this man is casting out demons but he's not of our group, so we told him to stop that immediately." And Jesus said, "No, no, no. Don't hinder him. Whoever is not against us is for us."

A little later in the same gospel some mothers were bringing their babies and they were listening to Jesus teach and apparently the infants were making a bit of a disturbance so the disciples come in and say, "Get these kids out of here, we're trying to have a religious meeting."

And again Jesus demurs and says, "Hey, you need to permit the tiny ones to come to me. Don't hinder them, for as such is the kingdom of God." The fellows complain and say, "Well, heck, these little ones can't sing in the choir, they can't take up the offering, they need other people to take care of them; they're a burden." And Jesus says, "Don't you hinder them."

Then later in Luke's second book on Christian history, the book of Acts, there is this eunuch from far away Ethiopia riding along in a chariot, and this Christian fellow named Phillip is hitch hiking that day, and he gets in the chariot with him and tells the Ethiopian about Jesus, and they are riding along and they come to a body of water and the Ethiopian says, "Is there anything to hinder me from being baptized right here and now?"

And it may have been that the religious community Phillip came from would have objected to an Ethiopian who was also a eunuch being baptized, but if there was, Phillip sucked it up and said, "No, there is nothing under heaven that would hinder that in the least and he baptized him right then and there.

It's easy to be glib about inclusion and say, "Yeah, God loves everybody," but, hey, this is hard stuff. There is no way we can do this unless by sheer will we can begin to move out past our own culture and backgrounds.

Think for a moment about the jokes we heard told when we were small around the dinner table, told by our cousins and uncles about people we were being taught not to like. Remember the pressures we were under to laugh at those jokes we knew were awful; jokes that divided the world up into us and them -- those who were worthy and those who were not?

And let's remember that this is as hard for the Assyrians as it is for the Jonah's of the world. It's as hard for the Puerto Ricans as it is for us folk from Utah.

When I was a mere adolescent NBC Nightly News ran a segment featuring a young black doctor who had signed an agreement to work in an economically depressed area for several years as a way of paying off his tremendous medical school debt. His obligation had long since been discharged and yet he was still at it; practicing in an impoverished rural, all white Southern community; often taking payment in chickens and canned beans.

"Why do you stay here?" asked the interviewer. You could be making a six figure salary, working half as many hours using state-of-the art equipment."

The young black doctor answered by telling a story from his boyhood. One day his little sister had cut her hand, badly. They took her to a doctor who was white. He examined her and said, "She's cut a nerve; it will cost \$27 to reconnect it." The family didn't have \$27 and so the doctor simply sewed it up to stop the bleeding and the girl was left crippled for life.

THIS was the young man's answer for why he did what he did! Now, 999 out of 1000 people would pick up a different message and a different agenda from that experience, but not his young man.

You could see something remarkable in the pain in his eyes as he told this story; hear it in the empathy he had for all those elderly people he treated who brought him their aches and ailments; people who just years before would have rather stayed sick or died rather than be treated by a black doctor. Now they loved him; swore by him -- said he was the greatest thing to ever happen to their community.

The book of Jonah ends with God appealing to a very angry Jonah, wanting to soften that man's Grinchy hardened heart. The question hangs in the air after God's last appeal to him is uttered -- can people who grew up under the pressures of prejudice actually change?

Well, it's up to us, not Jonah, to answer that. There are some beautiful precedents. Huge ones. What we know is that God never gives up when it comes to knocking on the iron doors of our hearts.

Amen