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September 20, 2026
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Jonah and the No Good, Very Bad Day

Jonah is a truly unique and remarkable example of one of the books of the minor prophets. Like several other books of the prophets from late in the Old Testament, Jonah is brief and rather direct, but it is a unique work in one very important way: it is written not as a traditional prophetic work, but as a narrative.

We often think of the bible as being fairly monolithic, but if you study it you will find that there are different genres represented throughout scripture: genealogy, history, letters, and parables to name a few. And our reading today is no exception: we find in Jonah something less like a recording of the words of the prophet for the people of God, and something far more like one of Jesus' parables—a tale that teaches us something very important about God.

If there's one thing that most of us remember from the story of Jonah, it's the whale (or the big fish)! We remember Jonah running away from God's calling, fleeing the opposite direction from his intended destination, toward Tarshish by boat. God, of course, sends a great storm upon the boat which does not relent until the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, where he is swallowed by a fish and held within for three days and three nights until he calls out to God for deliverance. And, of course, Jonah is ejected from the fish out onto the shore, where God once again gives him his marching orders: Go to Nineveh (a Gentile city-state and rival of Israel) and proclaim their need for repentance! And then Jonah sets out to do just that.

That's the story that we most often teach to young children, and it's the story that many of us recall when we hear the name Jonah, but that is *not* the end of the story by any means! If we read chapter 3 of Jonah, we find that Jonah heads to Nineveh—a city so large that it takes three days to walk across it—and he quickly finds great success in his prophetic calling. We find in Jonah 3:4 that he begins his trip into the city, only making it a day in—or one-third of the way—and he tells people, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Now, if someone were to walk into the outskirts of one of our towns and start shouting that, you can imagine we probably wouldn't pay them much attention, beyond maybe calling the police or social services for a welfare check, but the Spirit must have been moving through Jonah, because, WOW, was he effective! He was basically just making it into the outskirts and saying these things, and before we even get to day two of the trip, the whole city has begun to repent, entering into a time of mourning and fasting with sackcloth and ashes—the whole nine yards! The King even orders that not even the livestock or pets of the city will break the fast, so convicted are the people of their sin and the need for repentance!

Now, friends, if you or I were told by God to go and bring a difficult word to people that we knew we didn't care for, and who didn't like us very well either, and this happened, we would probably be very excited!...BUT NOT JONAH.

In our reading today, we get to that part of Jonah we often skip over, where Jonah isn't happy AT ALL about this turn of events—in fact, he's really quite angry about it! Let's look at his prayer to God in vv. 2-3 again:

“O LORD! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew you were a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.”

Why is Jonah mad? Because he doesn't *want* God to forgive these people!

Nineveh had been a serious enemy of Israel in the past!

They had been at war before!

They had no love for one another!

And Jonah doesn't WANT God to forgive these people! He wants them to suffer. Jonah is SO angry with God's willingness to forgive the Ninevites, in fact, that he would rather die than see it happen! V. 3: “And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” Talk about dramatic!

Jonah's anger and frustration reach absurd levels—but this is not without reason. This narrative, passed on through countless generations of Jewish teachers and students, uses the absurdity of Jonah's resistance to God's instructions and his frustration with God's forgiving nature to teach a very important lesson about the people of God: we are sometimes far less forgiving than we are called to be.

As Christians, we of course understand that we need God's grace and forgiveness for sin, and particularly as Christians who trace our faith heritage back to the Reformation, we hold God's grace in high regard. We understand that the wages of sin is death, and that apart from God's grace given through Jesus Christ, there is no redemption for souls that harbor sin—including our own. And yet, by the grace of God, the blood of Christ washes away our sin and makes us clean. We are forgiven, not because we have earned it, but because God has been gracious to forgive us.

And that grace does not begin or end with us, but it is extended to all who receive it in faith... and sometimes, that sometimes includes people that we might not choose to extend it to.

Permit me to extend our time of wonder today by wondering one more thing with all of you: I wonder... who is our Nineveh? Not a particular city, to be clear, but what group of people? What stripe of humanity? What segment of our neighbors do we find particularly troubling, disagreeable, or difficult? With whom have we been in regular disagreements, at loggerheads, or in conflict with? At the end of the day, who are the people that we would join Jonah in saying, “No, Lord, not these ones! Don't forgive *them*!”

As another election draws closer, perhaps our minds might jump to politics, and those folks in our social circles who simply don't see the world the way that we do. Or perhaps we might think of people who have wronged us in some way in the past, causing some kind of injury that we are not able to let go of. Or we may think of people whose sins are particularly egregious in our own estimation—God may be able to forgive them, but we cannot see how.

Take a moment to consider who it is that you would *hate* to see receive forgiveness... and understand that they, too, are offered forgiveness and the opportunity to repent by God's grace.

We should be happy for such a thing. But sometimes, that knowledge can really be a tough pill to swallow. The reality is that sometimes, we have a truly difficult time forgiving others when we feel they

don't deserve it. Now, I don't know any of you particularly well just yet, but my surface-level read of you is that you are all, by-and-large, wonderful people.

And yet, I don't feel like I'm going out on a limb by saying that there are probably folks out there that you would rather not be gracious toward. I don't say that because I think you're petty, or small-minded, or hard-hearted. I say it because, one, you are human; and, two, you are people who have a sense of the need for justice. You have seen how power is misused and abused, and it angers you—rightly so. You see how there are people around you in need, and you understand some of the systems that perpetuate that inequality. You understand a lot about how the world works, and how others are taken advantage of and misled, and it rankles you.

There are people who are deserving of punishment; who should face judgment and pay the price for their wrongdoing. We long for justice... but grace has a way of upending the justice that we desire. So what do we do with that?

I submit that there isn't an easy answer to that question, outside of trusting God. Jesus taught about this difficult topic several times, most notably through the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In that parable, we often find ourselves identifying with the younger brother, but it is the older brother that many of us in the church should consider: the one who lived as rightly as he could for a long time, only to become jealous of his younger brother being forgiven, and his return to home celebrated. The father's forgiveness and love feel unfair to the son who lived the way that he was supposed to.

One of the other lectionary readings for this week brings forward another parable that speaks to this matter. In it, Jesus shares the story of several workers who are hired to work a day in a vineyard, some in the morning, others in the afternoon, and some near the end of the day. When evening comes, all of the workers are paid a day's wages, even though some started working later in the day. Those who worked a longer day feel put out, even though they received what they agreed upon.

In both of these parables, Jesus lays out a situation in which those who have been living within the boundaries of their calling—within the grace of God—feel it is unfair when those who had been outside of it are welcomed with open arms. Like Jonah, when a people who had been against God and God's people are offered grace and forgiveness, those who had long been following God's calling and doing things "the right way" feel that there is an injustice.

And yet, when we are living in the knowledge of the grace of God and the love of Christ, shouldn't we know that we have all that we need? So what should it be to us if God chooses to extend grace to others? Shouldn't we be happy? Of course we should! And yet... our own sense of justice feels *unsatisfied*. Like the Psalmist, we may find ourselves crying out, "How long, O Lord, how long shall the wicked prosper?" Or, like Jonah, we may find ourselves thinking, "I knew you were forgiving and gracious! And now THIS?! It would be better for me to die than to live!"

But we would do well to remember the expression, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." We have been recipients of God's grace and forgiveness. We, too, like Jonah, are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and the opportunity to receive forgiveness and grace through faith. And that may just mean that someday, someone that we feel doesn't deserve it will receive the same grace and forgiveness that we have, and we will struggle to understand it.

But one of the most difficult things for God's children to come to know is that some things are not ours to understand. That's more difficult the more knowledgeable and wise we become.

Jonah had to encounter this very teaching. God raised up for Jonah a plant—described in some translations as a “gourd,” and others as a “vine,” which gave him shade during a time of great heat while he looked out over Nineveh, and Jonah was very thankful for it. And then, God sent a worm to devour it and made it wither, and Jonah was so upset about it that he—once again—asked God to let him die. (Again, the drama!)

But God then asks Jonah to consider something: “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?”

And that, friends, is how the book of Jonah ends—with an open question that has a fairly strongly implied answer. We might see all the reasons why *our* Nineveh doesn't deserve a chance for repentance and salvation; why it doesn't deserve forgiveness and welcome.

But God has a perspective that we don't. God doesn't just see the hurt that they have caused or the effects of their sin—God also sees all of the things that are redeemable. Nineveh had been an enemy of Israel, yet, but it was also filled with children who laughed and played; with parents who cared for them; with friends and families that made the city what it was. And in all of that, God saw something worth saving, worth giving a chance, even if Jonah didn't.

Friends, this is where I would like to wrap everything up neatly, tie it with a bow, and give you a pat little lesson that you can take out into the world... but I don't think Jonah invites us to that. Instead, Jonah asks us to join him out there in the heat of the desert, wrestling with our discomfort and even our anger in the face of God's radical grace... and to consider that apart from that very same grace, we would have no hope for ourselves.

Jesus invites us to accept that God's forgiveness for those who show up late isn't an injustice towards us, but that our longer relationship with God is a reward in and of itself. And we are sent out to proclaim that the good news is that ALL who repent and receive the grace of God given through Jesus Christ are welcome to receive the very same peace and assurance that we so greatly appreciate—even those whom we might struggle to extend it to ourselves.

So: consider who *your* Nineveh is; picture the Ninevites in *your* context and understand that God's love and grace is big enough even for them. And that is not an injustice toward you any more than our own forgiveness is toward God: so we should do our very best to place our trust in God's judgment—and **grace.**