

Pouting Prophet

4/4 series on *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*

Jonah 4 (Jonah 3: 10 – 4: 3)

06-21-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

During the past weeks, we have followed the adventures of **Jonah the reluctant prophet**. The story began with **God's call**: *"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'"*

To put it mildly, Jonah hated the entire idea. The **Assyrians** were Israel's archenemies and non-Jews to boot. Patriotism and prejudice informed Jonah's response. God said "Go" and Jonah went—in the opposite direction! He set sail for Tarshish.

But you can't outrun God. A **storm** arose that threatened to swamp the ship. When the sailors discovered that it was Jonah's fault, they threw the would-be prophet overboard. However, the Lord appointed a **large fish** to swallow him whole.

After three days and nights in the belly of the fish, **Jonah** FINALLY decided to pray. Not even the dark depths could prevent God from hearing his servant's cry. *"The Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the land."* No doubt both the fish and the prophet were relieved.

"THEN the word of the Lord came to the prophet a SECOND TIME, saying, 'Arise, go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim the message that I tell you.'" This time Jonah WENT! He might have been stubborn, but he wasn't stupid. However, the reluctant prophet still drag his feet the entire way. Jonah would have gladly formed a one man cheerleading squad if God had destroyed the entire city.

When Jonah entered Nineveh, he must have been quite a sight. His skin had been bleached white by the fish's stomach acid. Salt stained his clothes. Seaweed clung to his beard. A wild gleam filled his eyes. And he proclaimed God's warning with great delight: *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed."* Then he went to the hills outside of town for a ringside seat to the coming destruction.

The strange prophet's words frightened Nineveh's **king** into repentance. He exchanged his royal robes for sackcloth and sat in a pile of dust. He sent out a royal decree to all the city's citizens, calling them to cease their evil ways. Then they all waited for the forty days to pass. The third chapter of Jonah concludes with the words: *"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."*

I. Jonah 4

The **Nineveh sermon** was the highpoint of Jonah's prophetic ministry. A one time, one line sermon saved an entire city from destruction. Preachers DREAM of such results. Imagine me giving an altar call that saved the entire city of Cartersville. Folk would be so inspired that they might rename the church: "Bill Burch Memorial . . ." On second thought, never mind!

Mission accomplished—Jonah SHOULD have been pleased and proud. But he was not. Instead, he was outraged. The ONLY reason he preached at Nineveh was that unfortunate incident with the big fish. After he was unceremoniously vomited unto dry land, the only thing that kept him going across the desert was the prospect of seeing Nineveh BURN. Then the unexpected occurred. The Ninevites actually listened to Jonah and repented. God changed his mind and cancelled the 40 day demolition notice.

The prophet threw a temper tantrum right then and there. He fussed at God: *“O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? THAT is why I was so quick to flee 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. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than live!”*

God answered with a question, *“Have you any right to be angry?”*

Jonah didn’t even bother to reply. Instead, he went to the hills outside of town and waited, still hoping that the Lord would stick to *“Plan A”* and destroy Nineveh. The pouting prophet built a shelter and waited. The Lord provided a fast-growing **vine** to provide some shade from the heat and that made Jonah very happy. But then the Lord sent a worm to chew the vine so that it withered and that made Jonah very angry. When the sun arose, God appointed a scorching east wind to blow.

Jonah became so mad that he said, *“It would be better for me to die than to live!”* And God asked Jonah, *“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”* And the prophet replied like a pouting toddler, *“I DO. I am angry enough to die.”*

THEN God said, *“You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many innocent animals as well.”* The unspoken statement here is that Jonah would have been delighted to see them all destroyed. And God concluded, *“Should I not be concerned about the great city?”*

II. Us and Them

Even as a reluctant prophet, Jonah did not display the attributes one would normally associate with a representative of the Lord God Almighty. His human prejudice blinded him to divine grace. During the worship series, we have discussed the bad blood between the Jews and Assyrians. In addition to political differences, they were divided by ethnicity, culture, and religion. Jonah thought they were outside the pale of God’s love.

Human beings have an amazing ability to divide the world into groups of **“Us” and “Them.”** We segregate people based on gender, race, class, language, geography, politics, faith, and more. Some of our earthly divisions include:

Male and Female
Caucasian, African American, Hispanic
North and South
East and West
1st World and 3rd World Countries

Blue Collar and White Collar
Christian and non-Christian
Protestant and Catholic
Arab and Jew
Red States and Blue States

Liberal and Conservative

Coke and Pepsi!

The slightest difference causes the greatest divide. Then we dehumanize and even demonize people different from us.

The great theologian, **Dr. Seuss**, wrote a children's book for adults entitled The Butter Battle Book. In the opening pages, a grandfather explains to his young grandson the terrible differences between the Yooks and the Zooks. He says:

*"It's high time you knew of the terrible, horrible thing that Zooks do.
In every Zook house and in every Zook town
Every Zook eats his bread with the butter side DOWN!
But we Yooks, as you know, when we breakfast or sup,
Spread our bread," Grandpa said, "with the butter side UP!"*

Over Memorial Day weekend, I watched the HBO series, ***Band of Brothers***, which documents the actions of Easy Company of the 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division during World War II. The episodes are interspersed by interviews with actual members of the unit. One veteran talked about all the terrible things they had been told about German soldiers. Then he paused and said, *"But most of them were just like us—scared young men trying to do their duty."*

During seminary, I traveled to the **Holy Land**. I had always admired Israel's accomplishments and associated Palestinians with terrorists. On our first evening in Jordan, some of us were walking through downtown Amman and into a conversation with three young men. They were Palestinian students studying at the University of Jordan. They invited us to their "home" which consisted of a tent pitched on a lawn. We sat on pillows and drank "chai" or strong, sweet tea. They communicated with broken English and gestures, but their act of hospitality spoke volumes.

During the trip, I encountered Palestinians, Israelis, Jordanians, and Bedouins. They represented a diversity of culture, religion, and ethnicity. I do not dismiss the significant differences that truly do exist between various people. But the similarities were so much more striking than the differences. We are all God's children, created with loving care by our heavenly Father.

However, Jonah could not get past his prejudice and pride. He did not see the Ninevites as people worthy of God's salvation but enemies good only for divine destruction. There is a puzzling verse at the conclusion of Jonah 4 that talks about 120,000 people in the city who *"cannot tell their right hand from their left."* An obvious interpretation is that there were 120,000 children alone in the city that Jonah wished to see destroyed. And in a touching—almost humorous aside—the Lord God adds that this number doesn't even include the innocent animals in town!

III. Love Informs Action

On the far side of his big fish experience, Jonah reluctantly declared God's word to the Assyrians, but it was obvious that his heart was not in it. He acted out of personal fear and begrudging obedience.

Sometimes Christians possess the same attitude about God's service. We hear the Lord's call, and IF we respond, then we do so out of a sense of obligation and guilt. Jonah's reaction is an opportunity to reexamine our own lives. What is the motivation of Christian ministry and mission? Do we act in the name of Christ because we have to or because we want to?

Saint Augustine had an intriguing statement: *"Love God and do as you please."* At first blush, this sounds like easy advice. Just love God and then do whatever you like. But the more I think about it, the more profound the statement becomes. If we truly love God, then doing as we please means doing what pleases God! The motive for all Christian service is **LOVE**. We love because we have first been loved. We seek to share God's love with others. Christian disciples live according to Christ's Great Commandments: *"Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength,"* AND *"Love your neighbor as you love yourself."*

Love is the motivation for all evangelism and missions. We have not only the responsibility but also the privilege of serving in the name of Christ. Christians are heaven's earthly ambassadors, sharing what the Lord has done in our lives. It is not a case of "have to" but "get to" in our lives. To echo the words of a familiar hymn, we are called *"to rescue the perishing, care for the dying, Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save."*

In the TV series, *Seinfeld*, there is a humorous but telling scene between Elaine and her boyfriend, David. She has recently discovered that he is a Christian but hasn't bothered to share his faith with her. He is clueless why she is so upset.

Elaine: "David, I'm going to hell. The worst place in the world! With devils and those caves and the ragged clothing. And the heat! I mean, what do you think about all that?"

David: "Gonna be rough."

Elaine: "Uh, you should be trying to save me!"

David: "Don't boss me! This is why you're going to hell!"

Elaine: "I am not going to hell and if you think I'm going to hell you should care that I'm going to hell even though I am not!"

(Seinfeld, Season 9, Disc 3, The Burning, Begin 17:02, End 18:14)

The world is going to hell all around us; in fact, many of our neighbors are living in hellish situations right here on earth. We are called to reach out to them in the name of Jesus Christ and share God's love.

IV. God's Grace

Another theme that runs throughout the pages of Jonah and Scripture is God's **amazing grace**—but then all grace is amazing! The most painfully human moment of the book of Jonah occurs after the salvation of Nineveh. Jonah became quite angry and prayed to God, *"O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I*

was so quick to flee to Tarshish, I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love!”

The prophet fussed about how gracious, loving, and compassionate God was! Do we ever begrudge God’s love for others? I find a curious dynamic at work in my own life. I want mercy in my life and accountability for others. I want forgiveness for my shortcomings and judgment for others’ sins. I want God to overlook my mistakes but highlight others’ errors.

Hear the good news. God never gave up on Nineveh. When the people repented of their sins, the Lord forgave and restored them. The same grace is active in our lives. When we try to flee from God’s presence, the Holy Spirit pursues us.

AND this same grace is also extended to others. Sometimes we give up on others. We think things like, “She will never change.” “He is hopeless.” “They are beyond salvation.” No one is ever beyond the scope of God’s love.

There are some people here today because of mothers and fathers and grandparents who never stopped praying for them. Sometimes the prayers took a long time to take effect. But there are people in each of our lives who never gave up.

So let me ask a question: do we really want to get what we deserve? Or would we prefer mercy and grace? We are called to extend that same spirit of love to others.

In this scene from the *Veggie Tales* version of *Jonah*, the prophet is confronted with his hard-hearted attitude towards the people of Nineveh.

DVD <i>Jonah: Veggie Tales</i>	Begin: 1:07:57	“Jonah kept waiting . . .”
	End: 1:10:22	“You are pathetic!”

Conclusion

The book of Jonah concludes with God’s reprimanding Jonah for his lack of love and compassion. The fourth chapter closes with the Lord’s final question, “*Should I not be concerned about all these people?*” Jonah’s response—if any—is not included. One would hope and pray that it would not take another big fish to swing Jonah around to God’s way of thinking. But his past track record hardly inspires confidence.

We don’t have the chance to write a fifth chapter for the story of Jonah that might describe the reluctant prophet’s amazing turnaround. However, we have the opportunity to decide how we will respond to God’s Word today. The word of the Lord has come to the people of Sam Jones. How will you respond?