

Today's passage drops us off in the middle of a story that is the saga of Jonah, the reluctant prophet.

Jonah has been called by God to go prophesy to the people of Nineveh.

Jonah says no way, gets on a boat headed for a place called Tarshish.

God causes a big storm, Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard because he knows God caused the storm, and he knows the seas will settle if he gets off that boat.

So they throw him into the ocean, a big fish swallows him up, he hangs out inside the sea creature for 3 days.

The fish spits him up onto dry land, and here we are, at the start of today's story.

Even after all that, Jonah STILL does NOT want to go to the city of Nineveh.

But, I suppose the treacherous boat ride and the time spent inside a fish was enough to convince him that God is serious, God isn't going to relent and Jonah NEEDS to go to Nineveh.

I am imagining him shuffling his feet with his arms crossed, muttering to himself, "if I *have* to...".

And so, Jonah gets to Ninveh and he says, "*Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*" (Jonah 3:4).

Apparently that's all he had to say, because the text tells us that immediately the Ninevites repented.

The king made a proclamation about repentance and wearing sackcloth.

In fact, the king said, *"Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish"* (Jonah 3:9).

Well, wouldn't you know either God heard them and decided to oblige or the king was just a good guesser, or both, because sure enough,

God was going to bring calamity on the people of Nineveh for being evil, but God changed God's mind.

"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." (3:10).

Now, the prophecy, the repentance, God changing God's mind, this all makes Jonah very mad.

He said to God, *"O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country?*

That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning;

for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." (4:2).

Now, you might be wondering to yourself, why in the world is Jonah so mad that God relented from punishing the Ninevites?

Shouldn't that be a *good* thing?!

Not to Jonah, because the people of Nineveh were his enemies!

Jonah was an Israelite, and Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, which was Israel's greatest enemy.

The Assyrians conquered Israel and thousands of people, of Jonah's people, were resettled.

"The Assyrians were responsible for destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel, subjugating, taxing, and oppressing the Southern Kingdom, destroying the Judahite city of Lachish, and otherwise wreaking havoc across the ancient Near East. (Chan, Michael J. "Commentary on Jonah 3:10-4:11." www.workingpreacher.org).

"Nineveh's deliverance in Jonah's lifetime means that it will "live to fight another day," so to speak.

And fight it will: in 722BCE, the northern kingdom will be utterly destroyed by the Assyrians,

and for much of the next century Judah and Jerusalem will be firmly under the thumb of Assyria as its vassal.

God's mercy for Nineveh appears, then, to come at a cost to Jonah, and to Israel." (Odell, Margaret. "Commentary on Jonah 3:10-4:11." www.workingpreacher.org).

It's understandable that Jonah was so reluctant to go to, let alone prophesy to the people of, Nineveh, because he had a deep anger towards Israel's oppressors.

He knew God would be merciful and he didn't want that.

In fact, he wanted to deliver a different prophecy, which is also in the Bible.

It's offered to the people of Nineveh, by the prophet Nahum.

I will read you a portion of Nahum said to the Ninevites:

"Devastation, desolation, and destruction!

*Hearts faint and knees tremble,
all loins quake,*

all faces grow pale!...

See, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions; I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall be heard no more." (Nahum 2: 10,13).

See, that's what Jonah wanted to say to the Ninevites, but no.

Instead he says eight short words, *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* (Jonah 3:4).

And sure enough, the people repent, God relents, and Jonah is angry because he wants wrath and vengeance to rain down on his oppressors.

We usually think it's a good thing when God changes God's mind and decides to be merciful or forgiving, but what about when it's against our enemies?

What about when we want the wicked people to be punished?

How do we feel when the bad guy gets off the hook?

It makes sense that Jonah was mad, it's human nature.

In fact, he was so mad that he said he'd rather die than see Nineveh be reformed, that's how deep his hatred was.

Now, those of us who are familiar with the biblical stories know that most of God's decisions have a reason and there's very little randomness.

So I can't help but wonder, why, WHY God chose Jonah, an Israelite, to prophesy to his adversaries.

God presumably knew that Jonah hated the Ninevites, but God went after Jonah so fiercely, we know Jonah is the one God wanted and nobody else would do.

But the question is, why?

Theologian Michael J. Chan speculates that,

“Just as the giant fish is commissioned to place Jonah's feet back on the path of the prophet, so the wind, the worm, and the weed are commissioned to place Jonah back on the path of compassion, and to remind him that Yhwh alone decides to whom he will give mercy.

But the human heart clings to bitterness like a dog to a fleshy bone. It takes root so deeply within us that we would much rather die than forgive, cling to pride than embrace mercy.” (“Commentary on Jonah 3:10-4:11.” www.workingpreacher.org).

The notion of Nineveh being our adversary isn't that far-fetched.

Nineveh is a city in modern-day Iraq, which was under the control of ISIS from the 2010's until just this year.

In 2014, ISIS militants destroyed what was said to be Jonah's tomb in Mosul, also in Iraq and right near Nineveh.

ISIS also destroyed much of the ancient wall of Nineveh, including the Adad Gate, which date back to 700BCE.

Now, what if God called any of us to go to Nineveh, a place occupied by militant extremists who hate Christianity and the entire Western world, and who want to establish an Islamic caliphate?

What if God said go, and deliver the good news of the Gospel?

We might say, okay God, we'll go, if you are going to judge and punish them.

But what if God showed them mercy and kindness?

We might have been angry like Jonah.

"We wrestle with the goodness of God that demands that we be God's grace to our enemies, and to the innocent in their midst.

This goodness hounds us, follows us into the belly of the boat and the beast, into every place where we try to escape our calling,

and calls us out to speak the saving truth of repentance and mercy for all of God's creatures.” (Portier-Young, Anatheia. “Commentary on Jonah 3:10-4:11.” www.workingpreacher.org).

A group of us from the church are currently reading the book *Mere Christianity* and in this book, the author, C.S. Lewis states that the Moral Law, which is God, “...tells you to do the straight thing and it does not seem to care how painful, dangerous, or difficult it is to do.” (Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*, pg. 30).

This reminded me of Christianity, that it is hard, that this faith calls us to love our adversaries, our oppressors, and to never forget that they are people too.

Try as we might to deny it, they are created in God's image as well.

While Jonah is angry that God let off the Ninevites, God asks Jonah,

“And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jonah 4:10).

They need mercy, grace and forgiveness just like the rest of us.

While we might intellectually know that it's not our job to determine who gets punished and who doesn't, it's really hard to remember that sometimes.

We think we know who the righteous and the wicked are, but the truth is that only God does.

It's hard to accept this, it's not an easy road, which is presumably why Jonah tried to run away.

But I pray that each of us might have the courageous faith, which allows us to love our enemies as God loves us, and to leave the judging up to God. Amen.

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