

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy Jonah 1:1-17, 3:1-4:11

I. Jonah is Called

A. Modern day call

- Imagine that the word of the Lord came to you, calling you to prophesy
 - “Get up and go to Afghanistan and prophesy to the Taliban and ISIS
 - I will show you where they are and you will proclaim the message I give you.
 - You will cry out against them, for their wickedness has come up before me.
 - And I will be with you and will guide you.”
- Now, I can see that you may have some concerns and questions
 - How are you going to get there?
 - How exactly are you going to find them?
 - And, most importantly, are you getting out in one piece?
- However, you love your country
 - It is worth the risk to end the threat that these groups pose to our safety
- So you sing “Here I am, Lord” and make your plane reservations

B. What Jonah did

- The word of the Lord came to a man named Jonah
- **Read Jonah 1:1-17:** Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, ‘What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.’

7 The sailors said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.’ So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, ‘Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’ ⁹‘I am a Hebrew,’ he replied. ‘I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ ¹⁰Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, ‘What is this that you have done!’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

11 Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?’ For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.’ ¹³Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the LORD, ‘Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

17 But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

- Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II

- Israel's greatest enemy at this time was Assyria, whose capital was Ninevah
 - You can see the parallels here between Ninevah and the Taliban
 - Assyria represented Israel's greatest threat
 - Assyrians were ruthless enemies and would ultimately conquer the Northern Kingdom
- Jonah loves Israel and is just as patriotic as any of us
 - You would think that he would be eager to pronounce a word of judgment and coming destruction to the Ninevites, even at great personal risk
 - You would think...
- I don't know if you have ever heard the story of Jonah called a story of God's grace
 - Most of us remember Jonah for two things
 - He was a reluctant prophet
 - And he was swallowed by a big fish or a whale
 - If we think of this as a story of grace, it's in terms of the grace God shows Jonah when he runs away
 - But it's a lot bigger than that!

II. Jonah's flight

A. Jonah flees

- He heads off to Tarshish, which we know today as Spain
 - Edge of the known world and about as far in the opposite direction of Ninevah as you can imagine
- Jonah discovers that you can't run from God
- And even now, God shows mercy to Jonah
 - He doesn't drown
 - The storm ends
 - And Jonah is swallowed by a big fish that protects him until he yields to God

B. Jonah yields

- After three days in the belly of the fish, Jonah yields and prays a psalm of thanksgiving to God
 - God speaks to the fish, which spews Jonah up on a beach
- And the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time, telling him to go to Ninevah and proclaim God's message to them
 - So Jonah gets up and goes to Ninevah

III. Jonah in Ninevah

A. Jonah prophesies to Ninevah

- **Read Jonah 3:1-10:** The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.’

¹⁰ 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.

- World's shortest sermon – “Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown”
 - Actually, it's shorter in Hebrew, only five words
 - Notice that this is all judgment and no grace

- No invitation to repent
- No indication of any mercy if they do repent
- Get ready for destruction
- For three days, he marches through Ninevah
- And they listen!
 - Even more, they respond!
 - Everyone, from the king to even the cows and sheep, repent, wearing sackcloth and ashes and fasting
 - “Who knows?” the king says, “God may relent and change his mind; he may turn away from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”
 - God sees the Ninevites’ actions, that they turn from their evil ways, and God changes his mind about the calamity he was going to bring upon Ninevah
 - As the hymn says, there is a wideness in God’s mercy
 - God pours grace out on Ninevah, not giving them what they deserve

B. Jonah’s reaction

- Jonah has got to be one of the most successful prophets in history!
- You would think that Jonah would be celebrating
 - But he’s not
- **Read Jonah 4:1-5:** But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, ‘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. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ ⁴And the LORD said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

- And now we see why Jonah really ran when God sent him to Ninevah
 - He prays, “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.”
 - He wanted to see Ninevah in ashes and suspected, correctly, that it might not happen
 - Think about going to ISIS to proclaim their coming destruction only to have them repent and for God to spare them
 - That’s how Jonah felt
 - He was ready to enjoy the fireworks of their destruction and instead he got to hear their celebrating
 - He wasn’t celebrating; he was pouting
 - God, he whines, why couldn’t you have just punished them like they deserved? Why couldn’t you have made them pay for all the rotten stuff they’ve done? God, if you can show mercy to people like them, I just don’t know if I want to have anything more to do with you. Maybe it would be best if I just dropped dead right now so I won’t have to deal with you and your mercy ever again.

C. God shows mercy to Jonah

- God’s mercy isn’t limited to Ninevah
- Read Jonah 4:5-11: 6 The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’
⁹ But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ ¹⁰Then

the LORD said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And 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?’

- God creates an interesting contrast for Jonah
 - He makes a bush grow to shelter Jonah, then kills the bush
 - When Jonah gets miffed about this, God asks, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?”
 - Yes, angry enough to die
 - Well, God says, you are concerned about a bush which you didn’t plant or tend, which came into being in a single night and perished in a single night
 - And here is Ninevah with a hundred and twenty thousand souls in it
 - Should I not be concerned about Ninevah?
- Barbara Brown Taylor, one of our greatest modern preachers, writes that as far as she is concerned, that is the best closing line of the Bible
 - Should I not be concerned about Ninevah?

III. So What?

A. Can God be trusted?

- From Jonah’s view, no
 - Robert Frost wrote a short play called *The Masque of Mercy* based on this story
 - In it, Jonah keeps lamenting, “I can’t trust God to be unmerciful”
 - Jonah seems to have taken his mission as God’s personal promise to destroy his, meaning Jonah’s, enemies rather than God’s grace and mercy extended to all humans
 - This is the basic human tendency to demand that God join us in our hatred of our enemy

- God will not honor the way we organize the world according to our sense of who deserves mercy and who doesn't
 - Which is not to say that God cannot be trusted
 - Rather, the story of Jonah is a testament that God's grace CAN be trusted

B. Is God's grace limited?

- I had a congregation member once who stated with great confidence that not only did God not hear the prayers of those who had not been saved, God didn't hear the prayers of the body of Christ on their behalf
 - He had separated the world into the ins and the outs, friends and enemies and felt confident who God would hear
- Jonah's story is a powerful reminder that God decides who is in and who is out, who is friend and who is foe
 - This story shows that God will accept heartfelt repentance whenever it is offered, no matter who it is
 - God will show mercy on whomever God chooses to show mercy, even the Ninevites
 - Philip Yancy tells the story of Will Campbell
 - Part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s
 - His good friend and fellow activist was killed one night by a KKK member
 - Also with them was a man who didn't believe in God and who had pestered Will and his friend constantly about their faith
 - When Will's friend was killed the other man didn't let up, challenging Will's faith in the midst of his grief
 - Who do you think God loves more, he asked, your friend or the ones who killed him?
 - Suddenly, Will was in a crisis of faith as he contemplated the terrible truth of God's grace and mercy – that God loved both his friend AND the ones who killed him

- Yancy writes, “The free offer of grace extends not just to the undeserving but to those who in fact deserve the *opposite*: to Ku Klux Klanners as well as civil rights marchers...”, to believers as well as doubters, to Will and to his friend Jonathan, who didn’t believe in God
- We are all God’s children
 - Our divisions come from our sin
 - And we sin when we try to limit God’s grace by deciding who does and doesn’t deserve it
 - Because when you come down to it, none of us deserve it and all of us can receive it

C. The Wideness of God’s Mercy

- The title to this sermon is taken from a hymn in our hymnal
 - There is a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea
 - There’s a kindness in God’s justice, which is more than liberty
 - For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind,
 - And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
- There is mercy for Ninevah, and kindness for Jonah
- There is grace for you and me, and even for those who oppose or ignore God
- How amazing is that?!