

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 13, 2017

From Anger to Pity

Jonah 1:1-17; 4:1-11; Luke 15:25-32

Before we read the scripture, let me offer a word of **congratulations**:

We have spent a summer with the Minor Prophets and lived to tell about it!
Nothing quite like these divine messengers for a little light summer reading!

Now some of us may miss their edgy oracles
and their world-tilting pronouncements of doom,
as well as their persistent hope for God's deliverance
in the face of the most dire circumstances.

Others among us who prefer more polite speech may not miss them quite as much!

Preaching from these ancient messengers has been a challenge, I will admit,
partly because they are ancient,
but also, paradoxically, because sometimes, in the words of Walter Brueggemann,
"they read like they were written yesterday"
and can hit a little too close to home!

So we close out our Summer Series on the Minor Prophets today
with the prophet Jonah.

Jonah is in a category by itself.

Aside from naming a few historical places, Jonah cannot be historically located.
The book has been described variously as folktale, as a parable, as satire,
and as midrash (that is, a Jewish commentary or interpretation of scripture).

The book of Jonah is a narrative, the story of a prophet,
rather than a collection of the prophet's oracles.

In fact, his only proclamation, appearing in chapter 3,
and is a mere 5 words in Hebrew!

And the story of this prophet is really rather pitiful,
but pitiful in a way that may be instructive to us.

Today we will read the first and last chapters of the book of Jonah,
the first of which will be very familiar to most of you,
the last of which will be familiar to fewer of you.

So in our reading and hearing, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
may this story of the prophet Jonah become God's word to us.

READ JONAH CHAPTERS 1 & 4
READ LUKE 15:25-32

The Book of Jonah provides us with a sustained focus on the human experience of anger,
However, in the first scene the anger is not named
but simmers just below the surface.

In the first scene,
we might get the impression that Jonah is merely disobedient,
possibly just uninterested in doing what God has sent him to do.

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*,
Father Mapple, the preacher at the Whaleman's Chapel in New Bedford,
says that Jonah's sin is that of 'willful disobedience.'
He observes that God more often commands than seeks to persuade
because what God wants us to do
is usually too hard for us.
"And if we obey God," says Father Mapple,
"we must disobey ourselves;
and it is in this disobeying ourselves,
wherein the hardness of obeying God consists."¹

We might take issue with this and reply
that God's commands are really meant to help us discover our true selves,
and to obey God we must often disobey our false or sinful selves
that cover up who we truly are.

Whatever the case, Jonah is willfully disobedient. But why?

If we perceive any emotion in the first scene at all,
it may be that poor Jonah is **afraid** of God's call,
fearful of his assignment to go to the infamous city of Nineveh,
known for its great violence and wickedness,
to call them out for their evil ways.
So perhaps it is **fright** that sends Jonah running the other way.

This sympathetic view is often the perception we give to children
when we tell them the story of Jonah.

And we drive home the point that disobeying God can land us
in a whole lot of trouble.

And with children,
we often end the story with Jonah's being spewed out of the mouth of the fish
and going off to obey God's command.

But we have to read all the way to the end of Jonah
to learn the story of how the Ninevites respond to Jonah's proclamation,
and to learn how God relents from punishing them for their infamous wickedness,
and to learn how Jonah **feels** about the outcome of his preaching.

As it turns out, Jonah's preaching is immediately and unimaginably successful.
And Jonah could not be more unhappy about it.

**In fact, Jonah is downright angry about God's mercy
on the people of Nineveh.**

Now in chapter 2, which we did not read,
while trapped in the belly of the great fish,
Jonah has a sort of jailhouse conversion,
or rather a deathbed bargaining session with God,
and he makes all sorts of promises that are really not congruous
with his words and actions in the rest of the book.

But when Jonah speaks up in chapter 4,
we hear what's really going on inside his angry little heart.

And in his confession,
Jonah gives us the central focus of the book,
the text on which the whole narrative turns:

Jonah says to the Lord,
I knew this was going to happen!
*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.*

Jonah fled from God because he did not want those despicable Ninevites to receive mercy.
He wanted these people that he hates to get what was coming to them.

His anger at them is so intense it has robbed him of any joy in living,
and if he can't see his enemies suffer,
he'd rather just be done with his life:

*And now, O Lord, please take my life from me,
for it is better for me to die than to live.'*

Can you imagine being that angry? Can you imagine being that hateful?
Well, can you?

Can you imagine being so disillusioned with God and with God's world
that things have turned out so contrary to your desire
that you'd rather just be done with life?

Do you ever watch or read the news these days
and seethe in anger?

Anger at "those despicable people" — whoever they may be for you —
who are ruining our country and ruining the world?

Just think Charlottesville, VA, the last few days.

Whether those attacking their fellow citizens with tiki torches,
or those linked arm in arm around a statue,
not to mention the one angry enough to drive his car into a crowd.

Or perhaps your anger is closer to home, in your social circle, or in your own family.
Does it ever bother you to think that God would be so patient, so long-suffering
so steadfast in loving *some people*?

We may know Jonah better than we think.
Jonah may be us.

So Jonah needs an attitude adjustment
and God is quite willing to give it to him.

After going through the motions of obedience —
and it was only that, with his 5-word proclamation that doesn't even mention God:
Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!
(5 words in Hebrew) —

After going through the motions of obedience,
Jonah shuffles outside of the city and sits down to sulk.
He sits and waits and see what will come of Nineveh.
And the Lord keeps messing with him.

Earlier God had appointed a fish to swallow Jonah,
now God appoints a bush to grow up and give Jonah shade,
which very briefly makes Jonah very happy.

But then, almost immediately, God appoints a worm to destroy the bush
and to take away Jonah's shade and his happiness,
at which point Jonah is so angry at God
that he is again ready to die.

**We are now at the climax of God's encounter with Jonah,
the teachable moment at which God confronts Jonah
with the great spiritual challenge of his prophetic journey.**

God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?'
To which Jonah answers, 'Yes, angry enough to die.'
*Then 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.'*

*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?'*

Now our English translations are weak here,
because in Hebrew, God does not say, "You are concerned about the bush..."
but God says, "You ***pitied*** the bush..."
*And should I not ***pity*** Nineveh?*

God wants to turn Jonah's anger into pity.

The word pity does not show up in the story until this last two verses.
The turn from anger to pity is a new thing in the story.
God uses Jonah's pity for the plant to teach him how he feels about Nineveh.

Pity...which leads to compassion, benevolence, and mercy.

In J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, there is a creature named Gollum.

Named for the heinous sound he makes when he gets choked up in a fit of greed,
Gollum is the most hideous, despicable, self-serving excuse for a living creature.
Gollum plagues and threatens Frodo, the good Hobbit,
at every step of his noble quest.

So Frodo hates the creature Gollum, and he wants to destroy him.

But Gandalf, the wise and powerful wizard, who could destroy Gollum easily,
reminds Frodo that his old uncle Bilbo had learned to pity Gollum,
and did not kill him when he had the chance.
It was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand.

Gandalf says,

"Many that live deserve death. Some that die deserve life.
Can you give it to them, Frodo?
Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment.
Even the very wise cannot see all ends.
My heart tells me that Gollum has some part to play yet,
for good or ill before this is over.
The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many."

As his journey goes on,

Frodo begins to discover the many ways that he and the creature Gollum
are very much alike.
Indeed, Gollum himself was once a Hobbit.
And, as it turns out, in the grand scheme,
Gollum does have a purpose, a part to play,
in overcoming evil
and in the triumph of good.

And Gollum could only play his part
because Bilbo and Frodo allowed their anger
to soften into pity.

It is the same question put by the Father to Elder Brother
in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Will the Elder Brother hold onto his anger and let it destroy him,
or will he allow his anger to soften into pity, into compassion,
so he can rejoice with the family
that his younger brother who once was lost
has now been found?

The parable ends without telling us the response of the Elder Brother.
And the book of Jonah ends
with Jonah's anger still unresolved,
with God's question lingering in the air around Jonah.

How will Jonah respond?
There is not much in the story to suggest that Jonah will be able to make this shift
from bitter anger to compassion and pity.

But of course, by the time we reach the end
we begin to suspect that the story is not really about Jonah at all.
It is about us, and our anger.
It is about our begrudging God's generosity and mercy
toward those we love to hate.
It is about all that Jonah has in common with the Ninevites,
whether he is able to see it or not.
It is about God's pity shown to us
in not holding our many sins against us.

Will we sit beside our withered bush and nurse our grudges?
Or will God's pity subvert us,
and turn our hearts toward compassion.

The question lingers for us. God's question.
Should God not love the one who has wronged you
every bit as much as God loves you?
Should God not have pity on the one you despise
every bit as much as God has had pity on you?

If you find yourself relishing your anger,
or nursing a grudge,
or despising someone...

Watch out, Jonah!
God likes to mess with the self-righteous.

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or the White Whale* (New York: The New American Library, 1961) 57-58, cited by Phyllis Trible in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Vol VII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 501.