

THEN the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²"Arise, go to Nin'evah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah arose and went to Nin'evah, according to the word of the LORD....And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nin'evah shall be overthrown!" ⁵And the people of Nin'evah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.

But this displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, "I KNEW that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. ³Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city, and made a booth for himself there...⁶And the LORD God appointed a plant,^[a] and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.^[b] ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm which attacked the plant,^[c] so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint; and he asked that he might die, ...¹⁰And the LORD said, "You pity the plant,^[e] for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. ¹¹And should not I pity Nin'evah, 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 much cattle?"

This is the word of the Lord...

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

“The Second Time”

Jonah, good ‘ole Jonah. In this allegory, or satire, or parable, not literal history....in this favorite piece of holy scripture, Jonah has some lessons to learn as do we. If you recall, prior to where our reading begins today, God asks Jonah to go to Ninevah to deliver a message of warning to those living there. Ninevah was a large city, the capitol of Assyria, and the Ninevites were a violent and brutal people who had conquered many peoples and were a threat to Israel. One historian has said, *“There seemed to be no act of cruelty which these conquerors had not employed!”*¹ Jonah does not care one iota for them, and had reason to fear them. And he runs as fast as he can from his prophetic assignment and from the Lord who issued it. He boards a ship sailing to Tarshish, the exact opposite direction from Ninevah. But on the ship, things start to go wrong. A huge storm comes up and threatens to sink it. The crew members pray that they not be punished for the sins of Jonah, and indeed, when they throw Jonah overboard, the sea stops raging. Then the Lord sends a fish to save Jonah from drowning and Jonah lives in that fish’s belly for 3 days and 3 nights, after which the Lord makes it to spew him out on dry land. *I remember the silly little song my dad taught me as a kid.... “Jonah was a traveler so goes the Bible tale, he traveled in the innards of a transatlantic whale. Jonah in its innards caused the whale to feel distressed, so Jonah pressed the button & the whale, he did the rest.”*

Yes, Jonah, gets spewed up on dry land and the story continues where our reading this morning begins. God comes a second time to him and repeats the direction for Jonah to go to Ninevah. This time, Jonah obeys, but still his heart isn’t in it. He delivers the shortest sermon ever to the Ninevites...8 words! (Don’t you wish). He says, *“Yet forty days, and Nin’evah shall be overthrown!”* (i.e. “You’re going to be toast real soon”). And, if there’s ever proof that God can do wonderful things with the sermon of a flawed preacher, it’s here. The Ninevites, who know nothing of Israel’s God, repent. They all repent, even the King. Even the animals! They put on sackcloth and ashes and they change their ways. And God is moved with their change. God decides not to punish them.

¹ David Anderson. *“Ninevah, the Most Cruel Capitol”* In: Capitol Commission. <http://www.capitolcom.org/virginia/studies /947/2012/05/31/intro-to-jonah-nineveh-the-most-cruel-capital>. (accessed 1/20/18).

Now, Jonah gets angry, “exceedingly” angry. He knows that God is capable of such mercy, but “Why, O why would God show it to those horrible, strange, non-chosen, non-enlightened Ninevites?” Jonah gets so angry, in fact, that he decides that he’d rather die than watch it plays out. He asks God to take his life, and then leaves the city and builds himself a little tent, under which he can sit and sulk. And God, with, what I imagine divine eyes rolling, saying, “Really Jonah?”, raises up a tree to further shade him. But the next day God causes this tree to die. Jonah, nearly faint from heat, gets further angry because now his little tree, for which he’s been appreciative, is dead. He confronts God, and God, God delivers the punch, *“You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nin’evah, 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?”*

There’s so many lessons we can learn from this whale of a tale. But there’s two which really struck ME powerfully this week, because I’m sure I’m identifying with them. The first regards Jonah’s anger. I too am finding myself angry...under the surface...these days, and I know so many of you are as well. The bickering and blind partisanship (right or wrong), not only in our government but in our culture, the political ambitions which deafen people to listening the positions of others, especially those with little voice, the horrible silence when it comes to speaking up for the truth, for speaking truth...it’s discouraging. The relative absence of civility and respect for one another, despite our differences, the outright bullying, the horrible racism, sexism, classism which continue to be uncovered and even to bloom. I simply thought we were better than this. It makes me tired, and it makes me angry.

Yet, reading the Scripture, I am helped. It seems that anger, in itself...mine, yours, Jonah’s, may not be the problem, in itself. For even God gets angry.² The prophets tell us this. Stories in the gospels testify to it. God gets angry. And who wouldn’t want that? We want/need a God who gets outraged, irate, angry with humanity’s inhumanity, who will NOT turn a blind eye but is incense with injustice, who rejects passionately the plight of hungry and poor, the abused, the

² Joanna Adams. “Sermon: Count to Ten”. http://morningsidepc.com/archive/s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/1200763/1-25-09_Count_to_Ten.pdf. (accessed 1/18/18).

trafficked, and who is furious with things that demean and destroy. No, anger, itself, is not the problem, it's what we do with it. (*pause*). God's anger is never an end to itself. God's anger is grounded in love. God's anger works for the purposes of redemption and reconciliation.³ And so should mine. So should Jonah's. So should ours. (*point to self*)

Notice that Jonah's anger results in arrogant self-pity. He wishes that 120,000 people should die. He thinks, "God should reward the righteous, wipe out the evil and God loves Israel best".⁴ But this is not how God thinks. Jonah's anger is wrong. Joanna Adams says, "*Anger is a natural response to threat and danger. A hungry baby is right to scream. But anger as self-importance, anger excessively expressed, anger which is unwilling to be dissolved, THAT is when the sinful part comes in*".⁵ I love the story about *an old Cherokee grandfather who was teaching his grandson about life: "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf is evil—he IS anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, and ego." He continued, "The other is good – he IS joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked: "Grandfather, which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."*⁶

The first lesson that struck me so powerfully in Jonah is that we need do as Paul says, "*Be angry, but do not sin.*" (Eph 4:26). The other lesson is revealed in 3:1 "*The LORD came to Jonah the second time*". (*repeat*). Ah....God does not give up on Jonah! God continues to extend unmerited favor upon him, and to call him to be part of the divine work in the world. God calls Jonah to spread the good news of God's love for ALL people. Despite his rebellion, his horrible self-interest, his prejudice and desire for death to the Ninevites, God calls to him a second time, and if the story was to continue, I'm sure a third and a fourth. It's God's character.

³ Joanna Adams. "Sermon: Count to Ten".

⁴ Craig Barnes. "Sermon: Jonah 3:1-5,10" <https://player.fm/series/princeton-theological-seminary/craig-barnes-sermon-on-jonah-31-5-february-23-2017>. (accessed 1/19/18).

⁵ Joanna Adams. "Sermon: Count to Ten".

⁶ D Yeong. "The Fight of Two Wolves" <https://deanyeong.com/fight-two-wolves-inside/>. (accessed 1/18/18).

It always has been and always will be. Adam & Eve knew it. Abraham, Jacob, David knew it. The prodigal son knew it. The shepherds in the Bethlehem fields and the women at the empty tomb knew it. And the psalmist (139) describes it so well, "*If I make my bed in Sheol,*" he said, "*thou art there!*" "*If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day for darkness is as light with thee.*" Grace. It's grace, friends, that the Ancients knew and that we're talking about. The lesson is about God's forgiving, totally loving, completely inclusive, always pursuing, amazing grace.

And it's for us to simply receive. Confess. Repent. Receive God's grace....and then, empowered by the Spirit, step into the calling to share the good news of God's love for all, to share God's promise that evil will not last and that we are not left alone. Confess, repent, receive God's grace...and then, empowered by the Spirit, step into the calling to contribute to what God is doing, healing the brokenness of the world and gathering it unto Godself.⁷ That's it. That's it. Simple, but not easy...not easy because this wonderful grace that we need simply to receive is so foreign to our nature. It's hard to fathom. The lesson about anger, we get, but the one about grace, hard to take in. Hard to understand. Hard to give over to. As my professor used to say, "*it takes significant effort to recognize our sinfulness, but it takes Herculean effort to recognize our inclusion in Jesus Christ and forgiven by his grace.*"⁸

I will close with Frederick Buchner's definition of grace. He says, "*The grace of God means: 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I forgive you. I love you. No strings attached.'*" He goes on, "*There's only one catch, like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll just reach out and take it.*"⁹ May it be so. Amen.

⁷ Cyndy Rigby. "Sermon: Baptism of Repentance." <http://www.austinseminary.edu/page.cfm?p=3928>. (accessed 1/18/18).

⁸ Cyndy Rigby. "Sermon: Baptism of Repentance."

⁹ Frederick Buechner. "Beyond Words. Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith". (New York: Harper Collins; 2004), 139.