

"Mercy and God's Higher Calling"

Sept. 20, 2020

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11

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... ¹ But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He 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. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵ Then 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.

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. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When 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." ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, 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 many animals?”

Philippians 1: 21-30

²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶ so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. ²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.



As we continue to strive to learn to love our enemies, this morning we work with two texts that challenge and encourage us. Honestly, I have been where Jonah is.

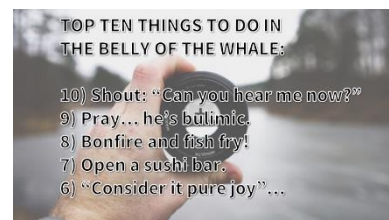
There have been times when I have wanted bad things to happen to people even after they had repented and pledged to change their ways.

I wanted to see them punished. I did not care that they had changed. It was hard for me to grant God's mercy and grace to "those" people. I did not want to hear God say, *"Now, now John, I have changed my mind. I will spare them this time"*. In contrast to Jonah's anger because God showed mercy, we will also hear Paul's call to live joyfully and faithfully for God, producing fruit for the kingdom even while experiencing the *"privilege"* of suffering for Christ. In some ways, Paul is the polar opposite of Jonah. Instead of being angry because someone else did not suffer when they "deserved" to suffer, Paul is joyful that he gets to suffer for someone else, namely Jesus. Today we wrestle with the free gift of mercy and our higher calling to be merciful, just as God is merciful. Two weeks ago we began with how to respond when others do wrong and last week we looked at how God responds when someone does wrong. This Sunday we ask, *"What does God intend or desire for those who do wrong"*? With that focus, let us pray...

This morning we begin with a little humor. We are jumping into Jonah's story midstream. So, as a means to begin our review...

TOP TEN THINGS TO DO INSIDE A WHALE:

- 10) "Can you hear me now?"
- 9) Pray ... he's bulimic.
- 8) Bonfire and fish fry!
- 7) Open a sushi bar.
- 6) "Consider it pure joy".



These 2 slides are really 12 slides. Title slide plus top 10 + one punch line!

- 5) Floss ... the whale.
- 4) Finally get motivated to read Moby Dick.
- 3) Listen to YouTube videos of your pastor's old sermons.
- 2) Call your mother.
- 1) Run and run and run and run and run ... until you're pooped out.



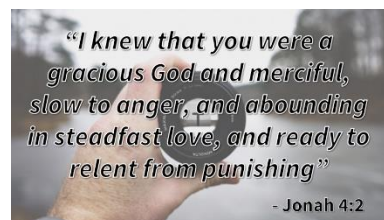
Mercy and God's Higher Calling

Jonah was one of God's prophets. He was directed to go to the evil city of Nineveh to proclaim God's judgment against them. In reality, it was God's call to repentance.

Instead of going, Jonah ran. He did not want to go to the evil city. He just wanted the enemy destroyed. Jonah thought that by not responding to God's call, the judgment would be carried out. Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days. Jonah wanted nothing to do with God's mercy toward Nineveh or with God's higher calling on his life. As Jonah looked through the lens that God was trying to place in his life, he did not see God's plans at the center. So, Jonah boarded a ship and headed in the opposite direction. A terrible storm arose, and Jonah's confession led to him being thrown overboard. Thinking life was over as he sunk towards the bottom of the sea, Jonah was swallowed by the "whale" or great fish. There in the belly, Jonah offers up a wonderful prayer thanking God for saving him and for delivering him from certain death. It is mostly wonderful. The last question in the GPS section of your bulletin deals with this prayer. I hope that you find time this week to study and reflect on Jonah's prayer.

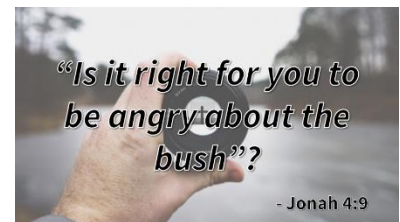
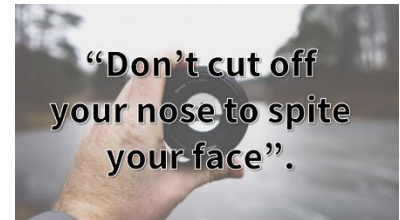
Three days later Jonah was spit out upon the shore – right in front of Nineveh. A very reluctant but obedient Jonah then plodded into the evil city to proclaim God’s judgment upon the people. For three days he walked the streets, proclaiming, *"Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed"*! The people of Nineveh responded with repentance. They dressed in sack cloth and sat in ashes. Even the king joined in when he heard about Jonah’s message. A royal decree called for city-wide repentance and sincere prayers to God. The decree declared, *"Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us"*. And that is exactly what happened.

Picking up the story today, in verse ten we read, *"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"*. Jonah became very angry. He thought they deserved to die. The Ninevites, the arch enemy, did not deserve mercy and forgiveness from God. In prayer, Jonah admits that this is why he tried to flee to Tarshish. He prayed, *"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 knew that there was a chance that



the people would respond to his proclamation and that they would seek God’s mercy. He wanted them to perish, to pay for their sinful living. He is so upset that he ends his prayer asking God to take his life. To die would be better than to see Nineveh spared. I have been there too. Maybe you have too. Someone has done something horrific and they just deserve punishment. And God extends mercy instead. Like Jonah, I have been left feeling upset, feeling mad at God.

There is an old expression that I used to hear once in a while when I was a kid. It was always given as a warning: *"Don't cut off your nose to spite your face"*. Have any of you heard that expression before? I heard it whenever I was upset about something that I shouldn't be upset about. I heard it when I would rather go off and pout about it instead of being graceful and forgiving and getting on with life. God asked Jonah, *"Is it right for you to be angry?"* That is what my mom or dad or grandma was asking when they said that old expression to me. Like Jonah, I knew the correct answer. And like Jonah, I often failed to choose the correct answer.



Yes, sometimes I struggled to give the right answer, to do the right thing. Jonah did too. Jonah marched outside of the city, built a little shelter, and sat down to see what would happen to the city. He still held onto the hope that the city, the home of the hated Assyrians, would be destroyed. To prove his point that he can choose to be merciful to anyone, God causes a bush to grow, giving Jonah some much needed shade. Jonah was very happy to have the bush and its shade. Then, using his unique sense of humor, God then sent a worm to kill the bush. The next day God sent a hot west wind and the scorching sun beat down on Jonah. Again, he became so angry with God that he just wanted to die. And again, God asked a rhetorical question: *"Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?"* God is asking about the bush, rightly so. But God is also asking about Nineveh. Is it right for Jonah to be mad about God being merciful and sparing Nineveh? Jonah responds, *"Yes, angry enough to die"*. That is a lot of anger.



Turning the tables, God notes Jonah's concern for a bush – that which he did not plant or grow, that which sprouted up one day and died the next. Jonah is then asked if God should not also be concerned with a city that is home to more than 120,000 people and many animals as well. This is an unexpected turn for Jonah. The one who was himself a grateful recipient of God's mercy, not once but twice, is angered by the mercy given to the residents of Nineveh. God sent his prophet into the city to speak truth, to warn them concerning their sinful behavior. As we saw last week, God's desire is to do good, not to destroy. God's intent in sending Jonah was for the city to repent, to see the evil of their ways, and to repent and leave those sinful ways behind them.

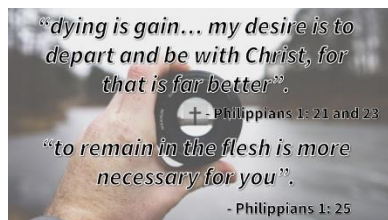
The book of Jonah ends abruptly right here, the question hanging in the air. We are left to ponder what Jonah does with God's question. The hope, at least for me, is that he who received God's mercy becomes grateful that mercy is shown to others, even to their enemies. The hope is that this experience and encounter with God changes Jonah, teaching him more about mercy and forgiveness. Just as God was eager to save Nineveh and to save all who receive his word in genuine repentance and faith, we hope that Jonah came to this place of repentance and faith as well. The moral of the story is that God loves all people, even those who need to repent. In his great love, God longs to see all people repent and to enter into a right relationship with the Lord our God. God seeks to redeem all people, even those that do wrong or harm.

The Bible is full of redemption stories. Life in general is as well. Most of us sitting in this room or tuning in on YouTube this morning have our own redemption stories. Our God is a God of second chances. And thirds and fourths and so on. Our second passage for this morning comes from one of the greatest redemption stories in the Bible. In my heart, I hope Jonah's story had a similar ending.

We recall that Paul was born Saul. As a Pharisee Saul was perhaps the greatest enemy to the early church. Saul did all he could to stamp out this new sect, this rebellious group of Christians. But instead of writing him off, of allowing some evil to befall him, God chose to redeem Saul. Through a powerful encounter with the risen Christ, he was given a new name and a new identity in life. Paul would go on to become one of the great evangelists of the Bible.

Turning to Philippians 1, we encounter this man who was a recipient of God's mercy and who willingly stepped into his higher calling to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul is the author of Philippians. Paul wrote this letter in 60 to 62 A.D., when imprisoned in Rome. It is written near the end of his ministry and near the end of his life. The letter expresses Paul's love and gratitude for the gifts he received from this church, sent to him during his imprisonment. Philippians is unique – it is one of the few books in the New Testament not written to provide correction. In contrast to Jonah's attitude and behavior, in this epistle Paul is joyful to have served the Lord, touching so many lives as he led them to a saving faith in Christ. In spite of the sufferings he has endured and in spite of his current placement in house arrest, Paul is still joyful because as he looks back on his life, he is fulfilled knowing he furthered the cause of Christ.

As we read the first few verses, we clearly sense Paul's longing to be with the Lord. In verse 21 he pines that *"dying is gain"* and in verse 23 he shares, *"my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better"*. Paul longs to be with Christ in heaven. But in verse 25 he concedes, *"to remain in*



the flesh is more necessary for you". Paul is willing to continue to be in ministry for the gospel because it is what is needed at this time in the church and in the kingdom of God. This is a great example of what it

means to have the heart of Christ and to place the needs of God and others ahead of our own needs and wants. These are the words of a man sure of God's mercy and of God's higher calling on his life. In the middle verses of today's passage, that is what Paul encourages the Philippians and us to do as well.



In verse 27, Paul encourages us to *"live a life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ"*. Paul unpacks this idea in verses 28 and 29, calling on the believers to stand firm in the Spirit, to strive side by side to share the good news of Jesus Christ, and to not be intimidated by their enemies. That was the story we heard last week from Desmond Doss' life, right? When we live a life worthy of Jesus Christ, others are made aware of God's mercy and of his higher calling on their lives. In verse 29 Paul reminds the Philippians that just as God did for Paul himself, for them God *"has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well"*. Has God graciously granted you the privilege of suffering for and with Christ? It is a great question.

At our staff meeting this past week Barb reminded me of a part of the “Hacksaw Ridge” movie that I had forgotten. It illustrates how living a life worthy of the gospel can impact those who we walk through life with. This short clip is titled, “Waiting for Desmond Doss. Please turn your attention to the screens...

[Movie clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6QDmeWhSHg>]



Can you imagine living a life that draws others in and causes them to wait for you to pray for them before they starting something? What a powerful witness to

what living a life worthy of the gospel means. The good news for the Ninevites is that God wanted to redeem them, to turn them from their evil ways, to repent of their sinful lifestyles, to connect with them once again. That was the good news for Saul as well. Through a personal encounter with the risen Lord, Paul was born anew. That was the mission that Paul shared with the Philippians as he called them to live a life worthy of Jesus Christ. That was the life that Desmond Doss lived as an army medic, a life that drew others towards Jesus Christ. Our God - my God and your God – continues to actively work to lead everyone from harmful and self-destructive paths to a journey with Jesus Christ, the only Lord and Savior. As I said earlier, our God is a God of second and third chances and more. God will do whatever it takes to touch hearts and to make us all whole. We can trust in that and in God’s love for us all, even our enemies. Will you join me this week in being a part of sharing God’s mercy and grace and love as we seek to live out God’s higher calling for us all? Let us pray...

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As a follower of Jesus Christ, how has your understanding of and willingness to share God's mercy grown as your faith has matured?
- 2) *Pray*. In your life, who do you know that is watching how you live out your faith? Are you living a life worthy of Christ? Pray for strength on the journey and to have opportunity to draw others towards the Savior.
- 3) *Study*. Read Jonah 2. Get a sense of Jonah's gratitude that God saved him. How do you justify verse 8 within this prayer? What does it reveal to us?