

Jonah 1, 3, & 4

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“When We Just Don’t Wanna”

The story of Jonah is often associated with the somewhat supernatural event of Jonah being swallowed by some kind of fish. It makes for a great children’s story, and I remember as a kid being fascinated by the details.

While preparing for my sermon this week, I realized that I liked the story of Jonah a lot more when I was a child. Because as an adult, Jonah’s behavior makes me really annoyed. It took me a few days to realize why, but I learned that I identify a lot with the Jonah at the end of the book. And that made me furious. But if we’re honest, a lot of us can identify with Jonah sulking under a bush and having an angry argument with God.

What happened exactly to make Jonah hate the idea of going to Nineveh?

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and was situated in the fertile plain near the Tigris river, in what is northern Iraq today. In fact you can still see the ruins of

Nineveh near the city of Mosul, Iraq. Nineveh was a huge city and had a booming population- it took 3 days to walk across it.

I've read that for Jonah, helping Nineveh would be a bit like an American helping the Taliban change their ways so they wouldn't perish. It's an extreme example, but it gives you an idea of the relationship between the two. Generally speaking, the Israelites did not trust anyone from Assyria. They were a bigger power who were totally capable of conquering Israel. In fact, this story takes place before the Assyrians took over and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. So Israel's distrust of Assyria was valid.

So when God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh, it is such a reprehensible thought to him that he doesn't even consider it. He jumps on the first boat going in the opposite direction to Tarshish in Spain. As we heard in the story, Jonah's attempt at avoiding this task doesn't go too well. A storm comes upon the boat and eventually Jonah is thrown overboard by the sailors, but God provides a large fish to swallow Jonah so he doesn't drown.

After three days in this stinky fish, we think Jonah has got his priorities straightened out. He says a psalm of thanksgiving and gets spit out onto dry land. Hopefully after a shower, Jonah reluctantly heads to Nineveh. And we readers think, ok Jonah, way to go. Way to change your attitude!

But Jonah doesn't put a lot of effort into his prophecy. He only gives Nineveh eight words to go off of. He says "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" No specific instructions, no details about what they should stop or start doing, and no introduction of himself. I'm certain that Jonah was vague on purpose. He was just doing the bare minimum effort that was needed to get the job done without being helpful at all.

But despite Jonah's bare minimum efforts, the unexpected happens. The Ninevehites not only understand what he's warning them about, but their response is incredible.

The people of Nineveh believe Jonah. They act immediately to change their ways. They declare a fast as a way of repentance. And it says everyone great and small put on sackcloth, which was a way of expressing mourning and confession.

Then the news of Jonah's prophecy reaches the king of Nineveh, and he too declares a fast, puts on sackcloth, sits in ashes, and declares that the whole kingdom should turn from their evil ways and perhaps God will show them mercy.

Now if the book of Jonah ended at chapter 3, it would be a nice and tidy short story. Because God sees Nineveh change their ways, and God decides not to bring them judgment.

And you would think Jonah would be proud of his successful eight-word prophetic act. He managed to go to a city full of people he despised, speak to them, and they listened to him and were saved from God's judgment. He did the unthinkable and he saved a city!

But Jonah is anything but proud. He is mad! He is outraged! He says, this is why I fled to tarshish, because I know you can be this way God. “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 asks the Lord to let him die. But instead God asks him a question: “is it right for you to be angry?”

Jonah doesn't answer God, but instead stomps off. He makes a little shelter for him to sit and sulk outside of the city.

Now why on earth did Jonah react this way? Why is Jonah angry that God acted like God? Why is he upset that God is a God of love, mercy and forgiveness?

Jonah was a stubborn prophet. Jonah had made an idol out of his stubbornness. His own prophetic gifts had turned against him. He couldn't understand how God could love such a nation that he hated. They had hurt him and his people, and they didn't deserve a second or third chance. Some describe Jonah as a bigot, as someone who hated an entire nation of people without getting to know any of them. And Jonah's prejudices were so strong that he was willing to die multiple times because he was an instrument in saving the people of Nineveh.

Jonah was exposed to one of life's harsh truths: that Life isn't fair. Sometimes the people you despise or envy are going to get things that you think they don't deserve. Sometimes people who are mean, prejudiced, selfish and downright nasty get opportunities and recognitions while the most wonderful people get passed over for such opportunities. And sometimes, even those who we think don't deserve a second chance get the opportunity for redemption. It happens in our world every single day. And there will be times in our lives when we are exposed to situations or circumstances that make us so, so angry.

The question is not 'how do I get this anger to go away.' Anger is a necessary emotion and reaction to injustice. Without anger, we wouldn't stand up for others who are being treated poorly. Without anger, we wouldn't be motivated to change the world we live in. Without anger, we would let injustice and oppression and abuse roll right over us without doing anything about it. Anger is a valuable emotion. Anger alerts us when something isn't right.

But we have to pay attention to what kind of anger rises in us. There is a difference between righteous anger from injustice, versus a jealous anger that is

bred from hatred and prejudice. We don't know what experiences Jonah had with the Assyrians before his call to Nineveh, we don't know what injustices he endured at the hands of the Assyrians. But we do know that Jonah hated an entire nation of people, and believed they didn't deserve God's mercy even after they repented of their actions.

Jonah's kind of jealous, hateful anger is the sort that we let hang around because it just feels good. That delicious self-righteous kind of anger that Jonah had can sit in our souls for years if we let it.

You see, we all either have or will have a Nineveh in our lives. There's going to be someone, or a group of people, who we think don't deserve God's love.

Unfortunately in our world, we see this all the time. We live in a divided country, in such a polarized world, and all you have to do is read Facebook comments to see people voice their hatred for their own Nineveh. I think we underestimate how much hatred we are exposed to on a daily basis. And we have to really be careful how much we let this exposure influence us. I catch myself sometimes making harsh judgments about people I don't even know, and I think its partially because I am exposed to hatred and prejudice so often in our world. Its become

normalized these days to spout hurtful words about people we don't even know. But like God reminded Jonah, this kind of hatred is not normal, not sustainable, and not the way of God.

The problem is, we are not going to be able to avoid experiencing anger like Jonah. We are going to be exposed to injustice, to those we disagree with, to people whose actions we despise. And we are human, and we are going to react like Jonah sometimes.

The question is not how do I get this jealous hateful anger to go away. The question is, how do I process this anger? How do I deal with this anger so it doesn't consume and become me? How do I process this emotion in a healthy way so I can move on and embrace "yes and dot dot dot" that God has given me? Because if we don't process our anger, if we sit like Jonah under a bush until the plant and our sunburned skin has withered away to a crisp, we will never move on into the "and" that God has for us. Instead, we will just blister and burn, wondering why God doesn't hate the same people we do. And that kind of living won't get you very far, or keep you alive for long. Just like the hot sun that was

burning his scalp, Jonah was letting his own anger eat him alive. That kind of anger isn't productive, it isn't helpful, and it isn't what God wants for us.

You notice the book of Jonah ends abruptly. As a former journalist and writer who enjoys a well-crafted story, the ending drives me nuts. But the ending is a metaphor for what happens when we pull a Jonah. When we let our own prejudices and beliefs get in the way of God's selfless love, when we act as a prophet and see no possible fault in our actions, we cut the ending short to our story. We don't let our story continue. We rob ourselves of our yes, and! Our story gets cut short.

Don't let such anger eat you alive or cut your story short. Because our God is a God of unending love who has a story and a gospel for us that we need to embrace. And our lives are so much more than our jealous, hateful anger. God has so many "yes, ands..." for us, but we won't experience any of them if we don't accept God's unending love for everyone. God loves and forgives even the people we can't stand. That is a truth that sometimes may be hard to swallow. But it's a beautiful truth. Because it's that same truth that saves us. So often we've gotten grace from God that we don't deserve. And that's the beauty of the gospel and

the beauty of the God we worship today. Let God be God, and let God love the people that you cannot. God is open to all and closed to none. Hallelujah. Amen.