

Unfinished Stories: Jonah

(Video: Jonah in 20 Words)

God decrees. Jonah flees. Storms follow. Fish swallows. Second chances. Jonah advances. God relents. Jonah's lament. Jonah's case. God's grace. I think that about sums it up. Most of us are familiar with the story of Jonah. He was given a job to do, but he didn't want to do it. God persistently redirected him until he finally got the job done. Our scripture today focuses on the last four phrases: God relents. Jonah's lament. Jonah's case. God's grace.

Jonah did not want to go to Ninevah. Those people were not God's people. Only the Israelites deserve God's blessings. Why should he go there to tell them to repent? Jonah had already passed judgment on them. He knew that God would take care of them! How quick he was to pass judgement on them.

How quick we are to make judgments about people and situations?

A little while ago, a young and very successful executive named Josh was traveling down a Chicago neighborhood street. He was going a bit too fast in his sleek, black, 12 cylinder Jaguar XKE, which was only two months old.

He was watching for kids darting out from between parked cars and slowed down when he thought he saw something. As his car passed, no child darted out, but a brick sailed out and – WHUMP! – it smashed Into the Jag’s shiny black side door! SCREECH..!!!! Brakes slammed! Gears ground into reverse, and tires madly spun the Jaguar back to the spot from where the brick had been thrown. Josh jumped out of the car, grabbed the kid and pushed him up against a parked car. He shouted at the kid, “What was that all about and who are you? Just what the heck are you doing?!” Building up a head of steam, he went on. “That’s my new Jag, that brick you threw is gonna cost you a lot of money. Why did you throw it?”

“Please, mister, please. . . I’m sorry! I didn’t know what else to do!” Pleaded the youngster. “I threw the brick because no one else would stop!” Tears were dripping down the boy’s chin as he pointed around the parked car. “It’s my brother, mister,” he said. “He rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can’t lift him up.” Sobbing, the boy asked the executive, “Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He’s hurt and he’s too heavy for me.”

Moved beyond words, the young executive tried desperately to swallow the rapidly swelling lump in his throat. Straining, he lifted the young man back into the wheelchair and took out his handkerchief and wiped the scrapes and cuts, checking

to see that everything was going to be OK. He then watched the younger brother push him down the sidewalk toward their home.

It was a long walk back to the sleek, black, shining, 12 cylinder Jaguar XKE -a long and slow walk. Josh never did fix the side door of his Jaguar. He kept the dent to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at him to get his attention.

We often judge before we have all of the facts. We judge based on our experiences, our beliefs, our personalities without taking into consideration that others have different experiences, beliefs, or personalities. Many of us have taken various personality tests or surveys – Meyers Briggs, DISC, or True Colors. Our staff, leadership, and worship arts teams have taken True Colors. This inventory helps us to see that each one of us is different - not wrong, just different. God has created us to have different gifts, different ideas, different personalities and together we make up the Body of Christ. We have ALL been made in the image of God, so why is it that we are so quick to judge those who are different from ourselves? The world situation right now saddens me because that is what I see – snap judgments made from one perspective without even seeking to understand one another.

Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world. *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him* (John 3:17).

Jonah's judgement led to anger. In verse 2, we get a better understanding of why Jonah was angry. The Message Bible puts it this way:

Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, "God! I knew it – when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness! So God, if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!"

That's a lot of anger. And God simply asks Jonah "What right do you have to be angry?" It is difficult to know what the root of Jonah's anger is. Is he mad at the Ninevites for being evil? Is he mad at God for relenting and offering grace instead? Is he mad at himself for running away from God? Maybe he was angry because God showed too much compassion and mercy, for forgiving THOSE people, and not destroying them. The bottom line is, Jonah was mad that God was acting like....God.

Anger is not bad. It is an emotion. Anger is a warning sign that something else is going on. What we do with the anger determines if it is healthy or not. Ephesians 4:26 says *Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.*

Clearly the anger is not the sin. “Be angry” gives us permission to have healthy anger. Healthy anger moves us to make changes in our lives, our relationships, our world. But Paul goes on to say that we should not sin in our anger, and we should not hold on to it. Often our anger comes from a distorted perspective or a perceived wrong. Then we react in ways that harm others or ourselves. Unresolved anger leads to bitterness, resentment, depression, anxiety and a list of physical effects: headache, digestion problems, insomnia, skin conditions (such as eczema), high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke.

In the last verse, God is trying to help Jonah process his anger. He’s asking him what right he has to be angry. God asks Jonah why he is so concerned over the plant that he didn’t care for, but is angry for God’s concern for the city of Nineveh. He is asking questions to help Jonah understand his anger; leading him to self - understanding and self-transcendence. He is trying to help him see the bigger picture.

But Jonah lets the sun go down on his anger. His last words to God are words of anger. *But God says to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he*

said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” We don’t know what happens to Jonah. The story is unfinished.

We do know that the last phrase, God’s grace, wins. God offers the people of Nineveh his grace and forgiveness, for they earnestly repented of their evil ways.

I wondered if Jonah was so judgmental toward Ninevah and so angry with God for forgiving them, why did God pursue Jonah so persistently. Is this story about saving the city of Ninevah, or is there another meaning?

Chapter 3 of Jonah is about how the great city repented of their ways. The king decrees that everyone should put on sackcloth and call upon God. God relents. But chapter 4, our scripture today, is about Jonah’s reaction to it all. He is filled with judgment and anger. And God is filled with grace. See Chapter 3 is about saving Nineveh. Chapter 4 is the process of saving Jonah.

Jonah’s story is unfinished. Is Jonah’s story one of blessing or destruction? One ending to the story may be that he remains in his anger and bitterness, leading to his own self destruction. I found some other possible endings for Jonah in Jewish legend:

1. He saw God’s mercy toward Ninevah and sought forgiveness for his flight.

2. Jonah learned his lesson from the plant and recognized God's mercy.
3. After 40 days, Ninevah returned to their evil ways and received the punishment Jonah predicted.
4. Jonah marries a woman known for her piety.
5. The story of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as a message of repentance and divine forgiveness.

God relents. Jonah's lament. Jonah's case. God's grace. God's grace is for Jonah just as much as it is for the Ninevites. God is all the things that Jonah says: he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in love. We don't have all the facts when it comes to God. We don't know his thoughts or his reasons. He told Moses "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion,*" (Romans 9:15).

This is the God who lives and dwells in each of us who believe, by the power of his Holy Spirit. We too are to be full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in love. I wrote in Indirect From Dave that to be "perfect" is to love as God loves. That is the message that we are to run and tell the world. Last week, I challenged us to be like Philip and the Ethiopian – to go and spread the good news: that God is a god of love and mercy. It doesn't mean for us to go out there and tell others what their sins are or to act in self-righteous ways. Many of the nones and

donees – those who have given up on organized religion, report that they don't come to church because they feel "Christians" are too judgmental. And there are many who represent that image. Recently, a group of "Christians" were in our district protesting at several churches in our area, one of them being a Methodist church. They say that "God loves everyone is a lie."

Our example of God's true character, the character of love, is Jesus Christ. Jesus did not come into the world to condemn it. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16). He came for the world. And we are his messengers. Not messengers of condemnation and judgement, but messengers of love.

But it is not easy to be messengers of love, peace, compassion and mercy when the world is filled with hate, judgement, violence, and self-centeredness. Maybe we feel like Jonah, why should we share the message of God's love to a world that is so undeserving?

FB Message – "Until America figures this all out, I'm going to continue holding doors for strangers, letting people cut in front of me in traffic, saying yes ma'am, yes sir, saying good morning, being patient with a waiter, and smiling at strangers. I will do these things as often as I am provided the opportunity, because I will not stand idly by and live in a world where unconditional love is invisible. Join me in showing love to others, no matter who they are, how they look, or whether you agree with them. When it starts to feel like hate is winning, find your own way to swing the pendulum in the direction of love."

This is not something that we can do on our own. We cannot love perfectly under our own power. We must stand on Christ alone, our cornerstone. For when we are weak, he is strong. And it is upon Him that our hope is built. On Christ alone.