

August 27th: Slow to Anger

Today we continue our journey together into the story of Jonah. I've mentioned the past two weeks that as we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together. So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

Today we're reading the final chapter of Jonah—and learning more about the conclusion of this story. Before we jump in, I invite you to pray with me.

Gracious Lord,

Our holy scripture tells us that you are slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, but we confess that we do not always live our lives the same way. We long to be more like you, and you have shown us a better way, so we come into your presence this morning with hearts that are ready to hear your voice and learn from your Word. Soothe our angry minds, bring relief to our conflicted souls, settle your peace on our tired bodies so that we might be able to receive the good news that you have for us and the message that you are calling us to share with

the world. Be with us in our uncertainty and remind us that we do not find peace in the answers, but in the act of seeking you.
Amen.

Have you ever finished a movie, or a TV series, or a novel and HATED the ending? Perhaps you were a really big Game of Thrones fan who despised the final season, or a Harry Potter fanatic that was super upset that one of the Weasley twins had to die in the final Battle of Hogwarts, or you literally threw your book across the room when Nicholas Sparks concluded another of his tragic romances with a less than happy outcome for his protagonists.

Well, I hate to break it to you, but that's kinda where we're headed today.

As I mentioned, we are almost at the end of our journey through the book of Jonah. We only have two weeks left, and we'll be using that time to study this confusing final chapter—a chapter that unfortunately doesn't leave us with a satisfying ending.

But first, let's do a quick recap—in chapter 3 we learned that Jonah's prophetic message that he shared with the city of Nineveh caused the whole population to repent and turn away from their evil deeds. The people that had once been Jonah's enemies turn out to be incredibly obedient to God, so much so that Jonah feels quite unhappy with the way that things have turned out. These foreign adversaries weren't supposed to be treated with mercy and forgiveness, and so we hear in chapter 4 that Jonah's temper tantrum about this unexpected reconciliation between God and the Ninevites continues.

Verses 2 and 3 say this: "He prayed to the LORD, 'Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'"

This is Jonah's justification for the anger that he feels—he argues to God that the reason he had fled in the first place was because he KNEW that God would

end up being more merciful than Jonah thought was fair. He contends that the reason he was so unwilling to go to Nineveh as the Lord's prophet was because he KNEW that God would be more gracious to the Ninevites than Jonah wanted. Jonah KNEW that God always intended to be more loving than he thought was warranted, and when God proves Jonah right, he's furious.

God may be slow to anger, but we've quickly learned that Jonah certainly is not.

And we hear that God apparently doesn't take Jonah's justifications well, because our text tells us that God responds saying, "Is it right for you to be angry?" I always laugh a little bit at this comeback, because God basically says, "who gave you permission to be mad? Who died and made you the God of the universe?"

I don't know about you, but for me, this moment brings to mind another Old Testament story—the Book of Job. If you're familiar with that story, you know that God allows for Job, a faithful man, to be tested—and all of his family is killed, his lands taken away, his home destroyed, and his body afflicted with terrible sores. Job receives a lot of bad advice from his well-meaning friends, and at the end, Job confronts God and asks why all of this tragedy has been allowed to happen to him. I think it's a valid question to ask, but God gives a similar answer to the one we see in this final section of Jonah: God comes to Job in the form of a whirlwind and says, "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!"

Job's reply is slightly less dramatic and more humble than Jonah's argument, but God continues speaking to Job, saying, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty."

But the two stories do diverge in some ways: where Job eventually reconciles with God and God restores his fortune, including blessings that amounted to twice what Job had before, Jonah and God's conflict continues. We read in verses 5 through 8 that Jonah isn't done complaining yet. He's got a lot of griping left in him.

Our biblical author writes, "Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live.'"

Ok, so it's very clear now that Jonah's a bit of a drama queen. This is the second time that Jonah claims that it would be better for him to die than have to endure God's seeming unfairness.

In verse 9, we hear a similar phrase, "But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

Jonah replies, "It is...And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

After this third proclamation of anger, God tries one last time to reason with Jonah, to provide some context for God's decision to save Nineveh from destruction. Our text says, "But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

God's basically saying, "I'm the one with the power over life and death, both with the plant and the people of Nineveh, so why are you trying to tell me how I'm supposed to use that power?" This sounds pretty convincing, but unfortunately, we never get to hear how Jonah responds. Because that's the end of the chapter and the end of our entire story. That's really it. A biblical cliffhanger!

I truly believe that faith is more about the questions than the answers, and curiosity about ourselves and about God is more important than any infallibility or inerrancy that we might want to attribute to scripture, but on some level, I totally get why a lot of preachers and biblical teachers avoid the book of Jonah—because in this case, it's not just that they're aren't any good answers, it's that the conversation doesn't even feel like it's reached a resolution. This story concludes with a question that goes unanswered. God and Jonah's conversation about anger and justice never gets a good explanation, we're all just left hanging.

If that feels unsatisfying to you, you are not alone! If you feel like throwing your Bible across the room, I'm going to ask you to refrain, but I totally understand the impulse.

As I thought about this passage this week, here are the questions that came to mind:

How are we supposed to understand and find meaning in a biblical story that feels so unfinished?

How are we, as modern day people of God, supposed to learn anything from a text that doesn't seem interested in giving us any tangible answers?

How can we navigate our own spiritual journeys in the face of such uncertainty?

What are we supposed to do with our questions, and our anger at a universe that doesn't seem to operate in a way that we think it should?

If any of those questions are resonating with you today, perhaps you might relate to Job and Jonah more than you might have imagined. Perhaps you too are feeling like there are no good answers to your doubts and frustrations with the world. Perhaps you are also grappling with a system that doesn't feel fair or a situation that doesn't seem to be right.

We'll have one more opportunity next week to further reflect on this chapter and our journey together, so I'm sure there will be lots for you to think about this week in preparation for that final meditation. So, with that in mind, here's where I'm going to wrap things up for today.

I'm a regular listener to a podcast called The Bible for Normal People, and one of the hosts, theologian Jared Byas, said this recently: "Faith is a process, not a starting point. Things that are worth pursuing in life aren't accomplishments. They aren't finish lines or conclusions. They are processes."

I think this way of looking at faith and looking at our sacred texts might help us to deal with the uncertainty and ambiguity that defines the end of Jonah's story. Jonah's travels to Nineveh was always a process—each step in each direction was just part of the journey. And just because he made it to Nineveh and did the work that God instructed him to do does not mean that his journey is complete. Nineveh might have been his physical destination, but it's not his spiritual destination—he still has a lot of work to do. The road to the capital city might have come to an end, but Jonah has a whole other path in front of him as he continues to wrestle with this experience and the truth that God has shared with him. We may not get to hear the rest of the story or know what the rest of his travels entailed, but it's clear that God is not done with Jonah yet.

And God is not done with any of us yet either. No matter where we travel, no matter where our paths take us, God has more to reveal and more for us to

learn. Not everything will be clear to us in our current location or life stage. We won't have all the answers, but we can have faith that God is leading us in the right direction. This life spirituality and personal growth will always be a process that keeps evolving—day by day, week by week, year by year.

So keep asking questions. Keep being honest with God. Keep listening for the divine challenges to our ways of thinking and being. Keep being faithful, even if this moment feels frustrating or heavy or difficult to navigate. Keep striving to be slow to anger, but quick to seek understanding and quick to offer compassion.

Keep an open mind, because God is not done with us yet.

Amen.