

## Should God Not Be Concerned?

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

March 11, 2018

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – Year B

Jonah 3-4



Jonah is in his own kind of Lent in the belly of the fish. He has been forced to stop – to stop fleeing, to stop hiding, to stop justifying himself, to stop any attempts at self-preservation. He is completely at the mercy of God, who has taken him down into this silent, deep space, preparing him, three days and three nights of darkness and discernment in the depths.

The poet Christian Wiman, past editor of *Poetry Magazine* and current professor at Yale, went silent for three years. Before that three-year period, he was a celebrated and frequently-published poet who had found a national audience. He was also a self-proclaimed agnostic, a result he said of his strict religious upbringing among West Texas Baptists.

Wiman met a woman and fell in love, and the act of falling in love loosened something in him, opening him to faith again. He returns to church with his new wife and begins opening again the gifts of faith. Shortly after that, he is diagnosed with an incurable blood disease. In the throes of his illness, he comes close to death more than once.

After his diagnosis, he went silent for three years. He didn't write a single line of poetry. It is a time of grappling with illness and with God. It is his own Lent, his own Jonah-like descent. And then, like Jonah, at the end of three years rather than three days, he finds his voice again, spit out of the belly of the fish on some bright shore, and he writes a poem in one sitting. That poem, entitled "Every Riven Thing," remains one of his most celebrated and is the name of a collection of his poems.

I know that not everyone is into poetry, but it would be worth your time to live with this poem some during Lent. I will not share the whole poem here, but will provide a link to it for those interested. For today, I want to lift a refrain that occurs four separate times in the poem. Each time it occurs, it is punctuated differently, so it brings out varied meanings.

“God goes, belonging to every riven thing he’s made.”

“Riven” is an old word Wiman recovers here. It’s the sort of word old Gideon Blackburn would have used from First Presbyterian’s pulpit back in 1811. Riven means broken. It means shattered or wounded or unhealed.

In the poem, Wiman asserts in the face of his own close and ongoing brush with death, in the depths of his own suffering, that God goes with him into it, belonging to every riven thing he’s made.

The operative word here for me is “every.” And the word seems operative in the Jonah story as well. From the beginning, God seems to have a deeper perspective on the Ninevites than does Jonah. They may be corrupt, they may terrorize their own people, they may be filled with moral decay, but God sees this as a symptom of a much deeper and more universal condition – they are children who do not know their right hand from their left. They are broken – riven – and their actions spring from this broken space in ways they do not even understand.

And so, God goes. God summons the prophet Jonah. And when Jonah runs, God chases him down in a storm. And when Jonah is thrown overboard, God chases him down and gives him the gift of time apart – a Lenten fast. And when Jonah is spit on dry land, God chases him down and summons him again. And when Jonah half-heartedly preaches destruction, God’s grace suddenly floods the scene, and we are made to understand that everything means everything, that all means all, and that these Ninevites, who do not know their right hand from their left, are God’s children too. And when Jonah, burning with anger because of God’s grace, removes himself from the city and watches for its destruction, detached and uncaring, God chases him down yet again.

What are we to make of this relentless pursuit of God’s grace? It extends to Jonah, it extends to the Ninevites, it extends to the *cattle*, which is a stand-in for all creation. God goes, belonging to every riven thing he’s made.

Jonah grew up saying the creed. Not the same one we say week after week, but close. It is a creed that shows up in the Old Testament eight times, in Exodus, Numbers, Nehemiah, in four different psalms, and in Joel. “The Lord is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” That creed had burrowed its way into the grooves of Jonah’s soul, so much so that he knew deep within, the moment God called him to go to Nineveh; he knew God would be true to who God was – gracious and merciful. And Jonah himself could not

muster the same grace he knew his God would. But no matter – God’s grace and mercy extended to Jonah as well. Again, and again, God puts him in the place where he can come to know the grace his ancient creed proclaims.

Contemporary theologian Marilyn McCord Adams spent her life pursuing some of the questions we are wrestling with this Lent. She affirms that God created the world in such a way that human beings and all creation are subject to what she calls “horrors.” She believes God created the world in this way to grant space for vulnerable human beings to be in authentic relationship with one another, to learn how to love. But that very freedom and space makes us uniquely vulnerable to being hurt and to hurting others and the creation itself. We, to use God’s words about the Ninevites, are like children who don’t know our right hand from our left.

Adams says that because God made the world in this way, God takes responsibility for it, and has provided in every instance of suffering, in every horrific situation, the greatest gift God can give – the gift of intimacy with God. It is a gift that can be difficult to see amid suffering, which is why the community of faith becomes vital. It is here that we are nurtured in the scriptures and the creeds, it is here we are encouraged in prayer, it is here we walk alongside those who suffer, that we might help one another open this wondrous gift – the gift of intimacy with God, the gift of union with the grace that made us and sustains us.

This is what Jonah discovers on his next day, after the storm and the fish and the plant and the worm – that, as John would later say, God is love. This is the root of all else that God is. And because God is love, God goes, belonging to every riven thing he’s made.

We leave Jonah on the hillside looking over the redeemed city, God’s gracious voice in his ears. Will he remain in anger, unable to embrace? Or will he go down into the beloved and broken and suffering and redeemed city to be part of what God, who is gracious and merciful, is doing there? We do not know as far as Jonah is concerned. But as for us? Let us go with God, belonging to every riven thing he’s made.

The invitation is ours. Come to the table of grace, where ordinary bread and wine become signs for us of God’s great gift buried in deepest suffering – in body and blood we discover the love that made us. Let us come down the mountain and dine together in peace. Amen.