

Storms of Mercy

Jonah 1:1-4

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 2, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. (Jonah 1:1-4, NRSV)



Some of you know we have a new dog, an adolescent black lab named Juniper. Like all young dogs, she comes with her own idea of how things should work around the house. Not surprisingly, her ideas do not always conform to our ideas. One of our inflexible rules is, no dogs upstairs. We’ve got enough dog hair to clean up as it is on the first floor. Juniper quickly learned this rule with some positive reinforcement. Just like me, she finds tasty treats to be a powerful motivator. The problem with Juniper is that her desire to be with us is more powerful than her desire for treats, and so she was constantly sneaking up the stairs against our will. Her sulking posture made it clear that she knew she was breaking the rule, but was willing to break it anyway.

That’s when we resorted to the dreaded can, a tried and true deterrent we have used with great success with our previous two labs. Something about the sound made when you shake an aluminum can full of rocks is very distasteful to dogs. It only took a few painful experiences for her to change her behavior and confirm to our wishes. Just in case she forgets, we leave the can on the fourth step as a reminder. She sees it there and decides that being with us upstairs is not worth the price of enduring that dreadful noise.

There is a principle here that you all understand. When somebody is doing the wrong thing in life, what is often needed is for somebody else to apply some hardship in an effort to turn the wayward person around from their misguided ways. I realize that when you’re talking about a dog, you’re not dealing with moral decisions but

instinct. With people, however, it’s more than instinct. What parent worth their salt has not applied this principle to help shape the moral character of a child? For example, your child is stubbornly refusing to obey, insisting on bending the truth, even telling flat-out lies. This is not behavior you want to see in your son. So you bring a little hardship into his life. He loses privileges every time he tells a lie. At some point – at least this is the hope – the pain of the consequences encourages him to start telling the truth.

Apparently, God does the very same thing with his children. What happens here with Jonah is a perfect example. God’s command to Jonah was simple and clear: **“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it...”** Jonah was a prophet and this is what prophets do, they take God’s message to God’s people, even when the message is a hard one. And, granted, this was a hard message. As we talked about last week, the people of Nineveh were absolutely wicked. This was a terrorist state in the ancient world. And chances were very good that Jonah and his message would not only be unwelcome in Nineveh, but that the people there might kill him for delivering it. Still, this was God’s command to Jonah.

But Jonah went the other way, going west by boat when he was supposed to go east by land. Make no mistake about it, his sin was intentional and calculated. There is no hesitation. As soon as he hears God’s command, he flees from God, goes immediately to the harbor in Joppa, finds the first available ship headed to Tarshish, buys a ticket right way, and jumps on board. Again, Jonah’s sin is not accidental or insignificant. He doesn’t just fall short of God’s will. His sin is blatant and grievous.

Notice how God responds? That’s what I want to focus on today. God gets out the can, or at least his version of it. Verse 4 reads, **“But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.”** It is difficult to misinterpret what is happening here. The Lord “hurled” a powerful storm in the path of the ship carrying Jonah to Tarshish. The word “hurled” is used elsewhere in scripture to describe what happens

when a person throws a weapon like a spear.¹ There can be no confusing this storm as coincidence or accident. Jonah has chosen sin instead of trust, and in response the Lord has deliberately sent hardship into his life, not so much to punish him, as we will see later in the story, but to turn Jonah back to the right path, which is obedience to the word and the will of the Lord.

Here is a principle we need to understand – every act of disobedience to the Lord will have a “storm” attached to it.² Jeremiah 23:19-20 captures this truth as well as anywhere in the Bible:

**Look, the storm of the Lord!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.
The anger of the Lord will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished
the intents of his mind.
In the latter days you will understand it clearly.**

We are in the latter days, and so we need to understand this clearly. When we deliberately choose to live according to our own terms in life, rather than God’s terms, there is a very good chance that God will send some storm or another into our lives in an effort to turn us back around and get us on the right path. Some of the hardship you have experienced in your life has been hardship that the Lord has hurled into your path. I want to spend the rest of my time this morning unpacking this reality and helping us to see how we ought to respond to it.

Since God sends these storms into life in response to our sin, let’s begin by defining sin. This is a challenge these days because we live in a society that increasingly wants to erase this word from our vocabulary. In a culture that wants to boldly affirm every desire and tendency in the human heart and mind – “you do you” – the idea of sin is simply not compatible. Even in the church, many people find the world distasteful. The problem, of course, is that the Bible won’t let us ignore the reality of sin. God’s Word is clear that every very last one of us has not only inherited, but also cultivates, a nature which is sinful, a tendency to live life on our own terms rather than on God’s terms, to essentially try and be gods ourselves. Romans 3 puts it clearly:

“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”³

In defining sin, I always go back to Augustine’s definition, which I find especially helpful in our day. In his work called *On Christian Doctrine*, he wrote,

But living a just and holy life requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things: to love things, that is to say, in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally.⁴

When you speak to people outside the church today about sin, if you want to have any chance that they might actually hear you, I encourage you to speak about sin as Augustine did, as disordered loves. Sin is simply loving things in the wrong order. For example, there is nothing wrong with loving my job. Work is a good gift from God, and it’s okay to love your work. But if I love my job more than I love my wife, I am loving things in the wrong order, not in accordance to God’s order, and negative consequences will inevitably follow, probably to my marriage. Jesus actually made this quite simple for us when he gave us the right order for loving things.⁵ Love God first, Jesus taught, with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Then love all other people around you, at least as much as you love yourself. Every other priority is further down the list. Sin is disregarding this order. For example, loving myself more than loving other people.

We tend to think about sin as the breaking of divine rules or doing bad thing. God sets up a rule, one we may not even understand, and we defiantly break it. But that’s not the essence of sin. Sin is loving things out of order, and sin is so destructive because, as Jesus made clear, as we love God more than anything else, orient our entire lives around him, in God we find our deepest needs satisfied, specifically our need for identity, security and meaning in life. As Augustine famously said elsewhere, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”⁶

¹ See, for instance, 1st Samuel 18:10-11 – “**The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand, and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, ‘I will pin David to the wall’ But David eluded him twice.**” This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² I’m indebted here to Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah* (Penguin Books, 2018), 24.

³ Romans 3:22-23

⁴ *On Christian Doctrine*, I.27-28.

⁵ Matthew 22:37-40 – “**‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.**”

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* (Lib 1,1-2,2,5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5).

You see, we have such a profound need to quiet our restless hearts, to find lasting identity, security and meaning in life, but we so often end up seeking these things elsewhere apart from God. We look to things like material wealth, status, comfort, career, marriage, family, or even our own morality and religion. Mind you, all these are good things in and of themselves, but when we make them into ultimate things, expect them to deliver to us what only our Creator can deliver, love them out of order, we place on them a burden they cannot bear. Eventually all of our idols fail us. Even something as good as a healthy marriage cannot give your soul lasting and ultimate identity, security and meaning.

Sadly, we are such slow learners. Instead of turning to God, we often double-down on our idols. If, for example, success in your career is not quenching the thirst in your soul like you thought it might, instead of coming to grips with that fact, you deceive yourself into thinking that the problem is that you just haven't yet experienced enough success. Just a little bit more and then I will find true satisfaction! So you work harder and harder and harder. Our world is full of people trying in vain to satisfy the restlessness in their souls by searching everywhere but the one place, the one Person, who can give us true rest. As writer Tim Keller puts it, "A life not centered on God leads to emptiness."⁷

I hope you can see why God hates sin. If he is the source of life, the only one from whom we can find true rest for our souls, and if he loves us like nobody else loves us, of course he will hate our insistence on loving anything else more than we love him. As somebody once said, sin is a suicidal action of the will upon itself. And so God doesn't hate sin primarily because it offends him, though it does offend him; he hates sin, finds it so offensive, because sin kills that which he loves, mainly us. It's not that different then when parents hate the sin they see in their own children because they see the damage it does to them. If we as parents, who are sinful ourselves, hate the sin we see in our children, how much more will our Heavenly Father, who is perfect in love, hate the sin he sees in us!

Understand, furthermore, that there are always consequences to sin, both immediate and ultimate. Some of those consequences are natural. Just as there are physical laws in the universe, there are also moral laws which are equally unbending. If you jump out of a plane without a parachute, the law of gravity *will* take its effect on you in harmful ways. In a similar way, if you continue to speak lies rather than the truth, it's equally inevitable that your relationships will

eventually suffer, along with perhaps your career and status, even your health as the unavoidable guilt will eat at you from the inside.

Sin also and always brings *supernatural* consequences. When people sin against us, we might decide to simply dismiss them from our lives. Somebody sins against you and you just cancel them. But God does not cancel people because of their sin. What he does instead is intervene and hurl a storm into our path, again not for the purpose of punishment, but correction. I guarantee you that some of the hardship in your life has been deliberately placed there by God in an effort to turn you around back towards him.

Now be careful here. Not all hardship is a divinely-ordained consequence of our sin. We live in a broken world where the reality of evil is ever-present. Few people in the Bible suffered more than did Job, and most of his suffering was not a result of his sin. In fact, Job was a righteous man who suffered great hardship anyway as a result of the hand of evil at work in his life. Realizing this, at one point Job declared, "**Humans are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward.**"⁸ Sometimes hardship and suffering are almost random in this broken world, and so we can't assume that every hardship in life is a divinely-ordained consequence of our sin.

But again, as the story of Jonah clearly illustrates, sometimes hardship does come for that reason, an instrument used by God in our lives to help us turn from our destructive sin and rightly reorder our loves. God's greatest desire for us is that our lives would be formed in Christ, that we would allow him to live in and through us, rather than see us deformed away from Christlikeness by the world around us. Hardship and suffering are one of the most effective tools that God uses in this formation. In fact, it's unlikely that any of us will be rightly formed apart from some level of hardship and suffering.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is a Swiss-American psychiatrist and grief expert who puts it this way,

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.⁹

⁷ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 166.

⁸ Job 5:7

⁹ Source unknown.

Again not all pain and suffering are divinely-ordained consequences for sin, but because these things so effectively shape us, it shouldn't surprise us that God will regularly use them in our lives in his effort to shape us into beautiful people who reflect Jesus.¹⁰ It would be enormously helpful if you were willing to reflect carefully on your life and ask God to show you how he has lovingly sent, or is sending, storms into your life to turn you around to loving things in the right order. I think of that dangerous prayer from Psalm 139, which you might dare to pray:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.¹¹**

When the Lord does respond and send a storm to lead you in the way everlasting, what has been your response? We all know children who wisely respond to correction, and others who dig in their heels out of stubborn pride. What sort of child are you when your Heavenly Father hurls correction into your misguided path? This is the crucial question I'm asking you to consider today.

This is an urgent matter because one of the problems with sin is that the longer we persist in it, the harder it is to turn away from it. Any addict knows this. The longer you keep using, the harder it is to stop using. These tendencies become habits, and then habits become instincts. C.S. Lewis puts it this way,

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself... Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state of the other.¹²

This is why Jesus urges us to take sin so seriously in our lives. He is deadly serious in Mark 9 when he warns,

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the

unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.¹³

Obviously he is speaking in hyperbole here, not literally suggesting we cut off hands and feet, but instead emphasizing the drastic measures that we should take to rightly order our loves so that we do not ultimately invest our lives in something which will leave us forever restless apart from God, which is as good a definition of hell as I can come up with. As Dallas Willard put it, "Hell is not an 'oops!' or a slip. One does not miss heaven by a hair, but by the constant effort to avoid and escape God."¹⁴ That includes avoiding and escaping, or ignoring, all the storms God sends in our life to turn us around.

I understand that when we are in the midst of storms that God sends, we may not understand God's purposes. It's hard to be clear-headed when things are falling apart all around you, even if the chaos and pain are meant to benefit you in the end. Sometimes it's only in retrospect that we can look back and see how these storms God sent were actually storms of mercy, motivated by his deep and enduring love for us. In fact, in time we may be fortunate enough to come to see that God was right there with us in the storm.

Unlike Jonah, we have the benefit of living on the other side of the cross, and so we should be able to see just how true this is. Because, of course, the greatest storm that God ever sent in response to human sin was the cross itself, where we see that the way God always saves sinful humanity is through weakness, suffering, and apparent defeat. Through the suffering and death of his only Son, Jesus Christ, an event that appeared on the surface to be nothing but tragedy and waste, God opened the way for all people to receive mercy and grace, to not only be forgiven for disordering their loves, but be filled with the power to finally order them correctly. Now, because of the storm of the cross, it is no longer our sin which separates us from God, but only our unwillingness to turn around and receive his forgiveness. The storms he sends our way are simply meant to produce a response of repentance in us that leads us back to Him.

It's interesting to me that God uses the weather to correct Jonah. Weather is going to happen with or without us. If you plan your wedding in Sacramento in mid-February, and anticipate 80 degrees and sunny so that you can have an outdoor wedding and reception, it

¹⁰ Scripture echoes this in places like 1st Peter 1:6-7 and James 1:2-4.

¹¹ Psalm 139:23-24

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1952), 92.

¹³ Mark 9:43-45

¹⁴ Source unknown.

doesn't matter how well you plan and how much you try to will your plans to succeed, the weather is not going to take your plans into consideration. Weather happens apart from our will, which means we either adjust our plans accordingly or suffer the consequences.

Jonah can make all the plans he wants to go to Tarshish and avoid giving the people of Nineveh a chance to repent, but he cannot override the Lord's will, which is to give them that chance. The Lord will always, always work out his purposes in this world, and there is absolutely nothing that we can do which will alter this. And so it always comes down to a question of whether we will conform, whether or not we will allow the storms God sends our way to turn us back to him, that we might participate in his good purposes for us and for others. The God we know in Jesus Christ is a good, loving, faithful, merciful God who always and only wants the best for us. If you believe this, you may actually come to welcome any storm sent for the purpose of driving you back into God's presence and favor.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Jonah 1:1-4 again. What do you notice right off the bat?
2. What's your definition of sin. Do you agree with Augustine that sin is essentially "disordered loves"?
3. It was stated that every act of disobedience to the Lord has a storm attached to it. Do you agree?
4. Dallas Willard writes, "'Hell is not an 'oops!' or a slip. One does not miss heaven by a hair, but by the constant effort to avoid and escape God.'" What do you think he means? Do you agree?
5. Looking back at your life, can you identify a time when God sent a storm into your life to turn you around from a destructive and sinful path and back towards him and his purposes for you? Tell the story.
6. How might God be sending a storm into your life right now to help reorder your loves? How are you responding?

7. Jeff called this prayer from Psalm 139:23-24 a dangerous prayer. Do you agree? Are you willing to pray it sincerely, and ready for how the Lord might respond?

***Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.***

8. What is the main message Christ has for you here? What is your response?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



God made things hard on Jonah by sending a dangerous storm. Why would God make things hard on his people?