

Message for May 6, 2018

"We Can Only Run So Far"

Jonah 3:1-5,10

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Prayer:

1. Summarize what we have been doing.
 - a. Bible stories that our children and grandchildren love. Stories that everyone knows and loves. And they remember the central person or idea. One cannot say Jonah without the whale – can we – but there is so much more to the story than the whale.
2. I love Jonah --- why? --- it is an easy read – only 4 chapters and the shortest book in the Old Testament. Turn to page 1441 in your pew Bible.
3. Summarize the first chapter of Jonah
4. Tell about the bus ride home and the people who cut in front of the bus – the diver, Art, had some choice words for the drivers.
 - a. Don't we love it when a guy – who flies up the road_who was speeding, get pulled over by the cop he blew past and didn't see.
 - b. We say justice prevails! And we are happy!
5. We love to see people get what they deserve...we love seeing when that annoying person trips and falls...we love the idea that if you do bad things you get bad things done to you in reply...
 - a. we love to watch our enemies suffer...
 - b. and for many of us that makes the idea of God's grace very difficult to accept; even when we claim to love it.**

6. We are looking at the book of Jonah, and Jonah is a disobedient prophet...and why he hated the idea of grace...especially for those in Assyria.
7. Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh since Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, an empire that had destroyed his Jewish homeland.
 - a. The Assyrians had killed many of his friends and family, raped the women, dragged the best and brightest, stole the wealth of their land, and forced everyone to work the fields to provide for the very soldiers who had decimated them in the first place.
8. Jonah wanted to go to Tarshish – which was in Spain – where the good times were – not to Nineveh – where the enemies of his people were.
9. But, Jonah knew what kind of God he was serving, and he was frustrated.
 - a. Because, if God sends a word of judgment to a people...God is also sending the chance for them to turn and seek after God and receive forgiveness.
 - b. But, Jonah hated the very thought of the Assyrians not being destroyed.
10. **He ran because he wanted to see the people of Assyria, the residents of the capital city, get what they deserved for the atrocities they committed.** If he could run far enough...then maybe, just maybe Nineveh would get what it deserved. Jonah did not want to be involved!
11. **But God wouldn't allow that...a storm at sea...a big fish...finally Jonah relented and repented and agreed to go to Nineveh.**
 - a. Look at the prayer in chapter 2 of Jonah and read it from the Pew Bible.
 - b. But, I'm guessing his preaching was about as inspiring as teenager finally doing their chores.
12. "FINE! I'll do it!!!!" Eye roll and all!
13. Jonah finally makes it to the city, he preaches about God's coming judgment, and then he goes outside the city to watch the destruction...except it never comes. The people of Nineveh from the greatest to the least repent and turn from their ways and turn toward God...
14. *Jonah 3: 10-4:2 (page 1443) says,*
When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. 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.

15. The people repented, turned from their sins, and God changed his mind about their destruction...he relented and didn't destroy them. And Jonah was furious...

16. Why? Because Jonah knew that's what God would do!

17. Grace makes us angry because we want to see people get what they deserve.

18. The Assyrians had done many horrific things, and it is easy to see why Jonah would want them to pay.

19. The problem is, God isn't in the business of giving people what they deserve...He is in the business of rescuing, forgiving, and restoring people.

20. While you and I may want our enemies to pay for what they have done...

a. God wants people to repent and find forgiveness and be restored.

b. God is working to bring about their redemption, and that can be difficult sometimes.

21. Someone has hurt you deeply...said some untrue things about you...called you some insulting names and rejected and turned their back on you.

a. Maybe someone has actively sought to do you harm...to hurt you...to get you fired...

b. Maybe they have abused and hurt a family member...

22. And it just seems wrong that they should receive any grace or forgiveness from anyone; especially from God...

23. Except, in the words of Jonah, we already know God is, *"a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."*

24. So, Jonah needed a very real, very personal lesson.

25. *Jonah 4:4-11 says*

4 But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

5 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. 6 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. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. 8 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."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

10 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. 11 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?”

26. This simple little lesson had huge ramifications for Jonah... he cared more about a simple, stupid vine than he did for the people of Nineveh.

- a. He was angry because the vine was destroyed, but also angry that the people of Nineveh were not destroyed.
- b. This is because Jonah saw them as enemies, and people deserving of judgment...

27. God sees our enemies as people.

28. God saw the Assyrians, the residents of Nineveh, as people, and as people,

- a. He saw them as worthy of receiving forgiveness and healing if it was at all possible...
- b. Jonah, on the other hand, saw them simply as enemies, and by seeing them only as the Assyrians or as his enemies, **he dehumanized them...**

29. We do this naturally, and often very innocently. Let me give you a few examples.

30. I try really hard to avoid telling people I'm a pastor because once I do...they act differently around me...they talk to me differently, they treat me different, ...they close down any real possibility of friendship...because I'm no longer Dick, I'm the pastor. I am no longer just a human being I am a job title.

31. On a regular basis you are driving in your car, and when you are cut-off by another person...you immediately go into de-humanizing mode. He is no longer a father with a family on his way to work...He is that, jerk, or idiot, or worse, in the silver car.

32. Soldiers have done this for millennia...calling their enemies horrible names and slang terms to help them not think about the fact that they are taking a human life...even if it is for the best of reasons.

- a. Even in our more sanitized moments we refer to them as targets, terrorists, objectives...and the innocent people caught in the cross-fire as "collateral damage."

33. We do this every day on the Internet...its anonymity...or, even if we see a face and profile...we do not actually interact with them as a person...so we do and say some of the most hateful things. And this is big time now –

34. It might seem like a small thing, but psychologist have demonstrated how this simple step of dehumanizing someone; reducing them to an insulting name, a vehicle, or an internet persona, allows us to think and even do horrible things we wouldn't normally do to people.

- 35. Because they were no longer people, Jonah cared more for a plant than he did for their lives...the lives of the families, the lives of the children...they were the enemy and deserved whatever they got.**
36. There are people in our lives who we have de-humanized. They have hurt us. They make us angry. We use terms like the Liberals! The conservatives! Muslims, Hispanics, immigrants. The enemy!
- a. And God reminds us that these are people...they have maybe done some hurtful things to you or someone you love, but they are human beings for whom Jesus suffered and died just like he did for you and me.
 - b. They are, at their core, human beings, and because of this, they are worth at least an attempt at rescue and restoration.
37. And the challenging part for us is that:
- 38. God calls us to take part in that process.**
39. God asked Jonah to set aside all his fear, prejudice, anger, and desire for revenge and take part in bringing healing to the people of Nineveh.
- 40. God invites you and I into the act of bringing healing and forgiveness to the people who have hurt us and would take advantage of us.**
- 41. God wants to work in us to make us the kind of people that can pray for our enemies, do good to those who want to hurt us, forgive the hurts others have done to us...even and especially when they don't deserve it or want it because in that very act of forgiving...there is healing. There is healing for us and forgiveness and healing for them.**
- 42. Many of us resist because we believe that forgiveness simply lets someone off the hook.**
- a. " We may say: *If I forgive them it means it doesn't really matter what they did to me!*"
 - b. No, not in the least.
 - c. Forgiveness wouldn't be necessary if what they did didn't really matter.
43. Jesus would not have had to suffer and die the way he did if the sin and evil didn't matter...if the pain they caused was irrelevant.
- 44. Forgiveness, on our part, is really about us letting the hurt go; refusing to give it the dignity of influencing us negatively, refusing to allow it to eat us. We let go of it and release them from our wrath...and turn them over to God.**
45. And maybe that is the rub...

- a. we, like Jonah, know that if we forgive and turn the power over to God that God is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity...and just like Jonah we don't want them to receive mercy and grace.
- b. We don't want them to have relief from any amount of pain they might get or deserve because they have hurt us.

46. Conclusion

47. So we ask the question of ourselves:

- a. Who is it that has hurt you?
- b. Who is it you regularly dehumanize?
- c. It can be simply the person in the other car...all the way to someone who has done some horribly evil to you?

48. Maybe it is a spouse or a parent...maybe a friend or co-worker...maybe you just feel hurt and angry because of all the rhetoric and hatred going on in our world...

49. There was a recent Facebook posting:

- a. *"Never regret the things you did wrong; only regret the good things you did for the wrong people."* **Really!**

50. I have seen a lot of stuff online that I don't agree with, but I actually hate this statement...because I don't want to be known as a person who only does good things for people who deserve it or people who haven't wronged me...**and I don't believe that following God allows us to make this statement...**

51. Many of you sitting here might be able to make a list of good things you regret doing for the wrong people...**but your acts of goodness say more about the person God is creating you to be...your acts of goodness and kindness in the face of evil being done to you is building hope and beauty into our world.**

52. Jesus reminds us, we part of a different Kingdom with different standards and a different calling...

- a. we do not overlook evil, but neither do we cheer the demise of the people who do evil.
- b. Because the same God offering grace to us wants to offer grace to them.
- c. And if His grace can save us then God's grace can save them.

53. The reverse of that is also true, because if God's grace is unable to work in their lives the most evil and despicable people on earth...it is unable to work in your life.

54. Jesus Christ refused to take up the sword and kill anyone, instead, choosing to die for everyone. That is who we claim to follow.

55. I want to leave you with the words and the very difficult challenge of Matthew 5: 43-48, 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

56. Thanks be to God!