

Jonah 4
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Aren't We Glad?

At the risk of placing myself squarely in the “get-off-my-lawn” demographic, I was raised on a steady diet of School House Rock and Looney Tunes on Saturday mornings. I loved Conjunction Junction, We the People, Pepe le Pew, and Marvin the Martian. My two favorite Looney Tunes were only on screen occasionally, so I would grab my bowl of Apple Jacks on Saturday morning and join my younger brother on the sofa to watch and giggle over the outlandish antics of Bugs Bunny, Foghorn Leghorn, and others waiting for Pepe or Marvin to come on screen. As you may recall, Marvin was determined to blow up the Earth because it blocked his view of Venus. And Bugs and Daffy Duck routinely thwarted his plans, making him furious: “You have made me very angry, very angry indeed.” And I would laugh. Every time.

Jonah is not Mr. Martian. I do, however, hear a slight hint of Marvin’s frustration and disdain in Jonah’s words in chapter 4. Things do not play out as he thinks they should, and he, too, is angry, very angry indeed. Jonah is so angry at God’s being “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” that he wants to die. He would rather die than live in a world where God spares Jonah’s enemies. This should not come as a surprise, I guess. After all, Jonah insisted that the sailors throw him overboard when God stirred up the stormy sea. Jonah preferred drowning in the depths of the sea to going to Nineveh. Early on, I suggested that Jonah must have been too terrified to go to Nineveh. In today’s text, Jonah insists, at least in hindsight that he did not want to go to Nineveh because he was convinced that the Ninevites might actually listen to his preaching, and perhaps more importantly that God would decide that Nineveh was worth

sparing. And Jonah could not stomach it, could not stand even the thought of Nineveh's being saved. And God asks him directly, "Is your anger a good thing?" *Is your anger a good thing?* In other translations God asks Jonah if he is right to be angry. And Jonah's answer in every translation is silence. Jonah answers God by walking away, out of the city. He builds his own little lean-to and hunkers down to wait and watch, to see what becomes of Nineveh.

It is easy for me to chuckle about grumpy old Jonah and his overly dramatic responses to God's graciousness toward others, at least at first. If I sit with Jonah in his lean-to for even a moment, I realize just how laughably similar he and I are. I am outraged when bad things happen to good people. I am downright incensed when good things happen to bad people. I don't get it, and truth be told, I do not like it. AT. ALL. I think I inherited it from my mother. My father has been known to say, "Judy saw the good in all of us, and aren't we glad she did?" My mother was abundantly loving. She was also fiercely protective of the underdog. I recall her solo letter writing campaign when it was revealed that a major corporation was allowing cans of tainted formula to be sold in poorer countries. In her perfect handwriting—which I did NOT inherit—she crafted angry letters to every bigwig she could find an address for. Mom had no patience for people in power who stomped on or ignored the little ones. And while she was extravagantly loving and quick to see the good in everyone she met, she also had a strong desire for justice. She wanted the mean, selfish, self-serving bad guys to get their just desserts. Which is why—she confessed to me one afternoon—that she loved the movie, *Ghost*. She said she loved the movie not for the love story or for Patrick Swayze but because the bad guys get it in the end, and we get to see it play out on screen. Yes, Mom saw the good in just about everyone, and Mom got great satisfaction when those bad guys in *Ghost* got exactly what they deserved.

I was raised to be a proper southern lady, and proper southern ladies are meant to keep calm and carry on. Overt anger is—or was—frowned upon. Maybe that’s why Mom felt a need to confess her glee over the end of *Ghost*. And yet, anger is a very real, legitimate human emotion. Uncontrolled anger can lead to violence. Unexpressed anger can lead to anxiety and depression, as well as gritted teeth, passive aggressive behavior, cold shoulders, and fractured relationships. None of these are who God calls us to be as individuals or as a community. I’d argue that mom’s anger at that corporation’s love of money over children’s welfare was a good thing, holy even. And her one-woman letter writing campaign was a healthy, righteous, and good response. The description of God that Jonah cites describes God as “slow to anger.” Scripture does not say that God never gets angry, rather that anger is not God’s default drive. God gets angry about the Hebrews’ plight in Egypt. Jesus gets angry about the corrupt practices in the Temple. Jonah gets angry about God’s being gracious to those Jonah finds undeserving. And Jonah gets angry about a plant. God never once tells Jonah he should not be angry. Instead, God tries to show Jonah God’s point of view.

“Is your anger about the plant a good thing?” God asks Jonah. Once again, Jonah insists that his anger is so good, so righteous in fact that he is willing to die to hang on to it. He clutches that anger for all its worth; his anger becomes so dear to him that he would trade it for life in a broken world beloved by God. In his love for the fly-by-night plant and for his carefully nurtured anger, Jonah misses the fact that the Ninevites are not the only ones cherished by God. Jonah fails to appreciate that this God of second chances has given him abundant do-overs, too. God’s slow-to-anger-and-abounding-in-steadfast-love ways have not just been a blessing and a benefit to the Ninevites. God has been exceedingly gracious to Jonah as well. In

fact, the book ends with a blessed do-over in its ending that isn't a dead end, with an open invitation to Jonah and to all who read the story to reconsider just how good our anger really is and to see God for who God is and always will be.

Because if we're honest, we're good and angry a lot of the time, or at least angry. The world around us certainly is. At times our society seems utterly determined to hang onto our anger no matter what, addicted to outrage no matter the cost. And the cost is steep. I want to be crystal clear: anger is not always a bad thing. Anger can be a good thing. Righteous anger fueled the Civil Rights movement. Anger has led to higher levels of care for the water we drink and the air we breathe. Anger about injustice, callousness, inequality, and greed can be good, healthy, and even holy. Unfortunately, I'm afraid at least my anger veers more occasionally into the plant category. I can hold a grudge and keep score with the best of them. I might be able to give Jonah a run for his money. And I confess that I can get downright livid with God when I recall that God adores "the liars and the dirty, dirty cheats of the world," just as much as God adores me.¹

In the end, God gets the last word:

But the Lord said, 'You "pitied" the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'²

¹ Taylor Swift, "Shake It Off" lyrics

² Jonah 4: 11, Common English Bible

If I were God, I'd be fed up with Jonah. I'd probably be ready to grant his wish, answer his prayer, and put him out of his misery. But I am not God, not even remotely. How many days do I fail to know my right hand from my left? How often does my anger, my frustration get the best of me?

And when it does, when I say I want justice when what I really want is vengeance, when all I can see is red, God remains slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. When all I can clutch is a withered plant, when I simply can't stand knowing that God loves whoever is currently at the top of my "them" list, God stays stubbornly and faithfully determined to draw out the good in me, the good in all. Without fail, God tirelessly persists in wanting the best for me and for all, in calling us back to God's way of grace and justice, and in shaping us into our most gracious selves, and aren't we glad he does?

Thanks be to God. Amen.