

Jonah
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A Good Thing?

This morning's text brings us to Jonah, the reluctant prophet as many bibles refer to him. Most people know the Jonah story, or at least the first part. A few years ago, a friend sent me a link to footage of a kayaker in California who was whale watching when out of nowhere, she found herself in the mouth of a humpback. The whale was after a school of fish, and the kayaker got in the way. The whale quickly spat the kayaker back out, and she was fine, just a little shook with a shirt full of fish. Of course, the news story referenced Jonah and the similarity between the two tales.¹ There are differences, too, of course. Jonah, the text tells us winds up in the belly of the big fish because God calls him to go one way, and he heads in the opposite direction. God calls Jonah to head to Nineveh, the belly of the Assyrian Empire, and Jonah boards a boat for a port as far away from Nineveh as he can go. God stirs up a violent storm, and Jonah tells the frightened sailors to toss him overboard to calm the storm. They do, and it does. And at God's command the fish swallows Jonah up. He prays a prayer of thanksgiving during his three days underwater, and then the fish—again at God's command—spits him out on dry land. That's the story most of us know, but it is only the beginning. [Jonah 3]

One would think that it is time for Jonah's victory lap. This, THIS should get him in the Prophets Hall of Fame, right?! After all, other prophets preach for years and the people—their own people—do not listen, at all. But here, after an eight-word sermon, the Ninevites do. It is

¹ <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2020/11/03/us/whale-kayak-trnd/index.html>

extraordinary really. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, perhaps the most vicious of Israel's enemies. As Professor Roger Nam points out:

Nineveh was proud of killing Judeans...If you visit the British Museum, you can see spectacular wall reliefs depicting Assyrian sieges. The famous siege of Lachish shows multiple images of Judeans being [killed in multiple violent ways]. Archaeologists discovered this relief in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh.²

So I for one am sympathetic to Jonah's impulse to run—or sail—in the opposite direction. This is not a matter of a Carolina fan marching into Cameron Indoor to preach repentance. God is sending the prophet into the heart of enemy territory. I'd run, too. As fast as my little legs could carry me.

After his time in the big fish, Jonah is apparently persuaded to go to Nineveh after all. And after walking only a third of the way across the city, Jonah is stunned when all the inhabitants of that city—humans and livestock alike repent of their violent ways and put on sackcloth. We might expect Jonah to celebrate with fist pumps and whoops of joy. [Jonah 4]

Not too many years ago, many of us tried our best to reorder our lives based on the wisdom of Marie Kondo and her book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. She taught us—or tried to teach us—to clean out our homes by asking one central question, “Does this (sock, shirt, fishing rod, or VHS tape) bring you joy?” There were abundant jokes about throwing out washing machines, credit card bills, and even spouses or children, but her question pushed me to deeper reflection. I still have not managed to get my sock drawer under control, but her

²http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4654
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Lachish

words linger with me. For years, I had a bowl sitting on my dresser filled with extra buttons, a small notebook, and some safety pins. It took the whirlwind of moving to get me to give away the buttons and put the safety pins in the sewing box. With the exception of the notebook, I am fairly certain that I did not hang on to any of those things because they brought me joy. I hung on to them—especially those buttons—because I had a sense that I was supposed to, and I was afraid that the second I pitched them, I would need them. After 3 ½ years, I have not, at least not yet, but on some level, I still worry that I will.

Different translations have different takes on God’s question to Jonah, but this week it was the Common English Bible’s translation that stuck with me: “Is your anger a good thing?” And Jonah’s response? The first time God asks, after the whole of Nineveh repents, Jonah says nothing and hightails it outside the city. God makes a plant grow to give Jonah shade, and Jonah grows enamored with the shade-giver. Then God brings an end to the shade and the shade-giver, and Jonah is at the end of his rope. And God asks again a second time, “Is your anger about the plant a good thing?” And Jonah insists, “Yes. Even if it kills me.”

“Is your anger a good thing?” I think it matters that God does not say flat out that anger in every form is bad. Scripture tells us that God is slow to anger. That does not mean that God does not get angry. God is angry countless times throughout scripture, when the people are unfaithful, when orphans and widows are tossed aside, when the poor are trampled by the whims of the powerful. Jesus himself is angry enough to turn over tables in the Temple. My friend and colleague Mary Ann McKibben Dana reminds me that anger—and even rage—can be fueled by fierce love and protection particularly in mammal mothers. In her book, *Hope: A User’s Manual*, she quotes writer Valarie Kaur who points out:

When babies are threatened, oxytocin [the love hormone] actually increases aggression. For mothers, rage is part of love: it is the biological force that protects that which is loved.³

The plant is dear to Jonah, at least in the moment, but he did not make the plant grow; he did not create the plant. So God wants to know if Jonah believes his own anger is a good thing, a pleasing thing, a constructive thing, a holy thing. This question lingers with me because there have been times when I have hung on tightly to my anger. I can be a fierce mama bear if someone crosses my child or anyone else I love, and I can nurse anger and resentment over countless other wrongs and slights, too. If Marie Kondo asked me if that brand of anger brought me joy, I might not respond with a full-throated *yes*, but I might have tucked it back in a drawer to keep it safe anyway. After all, I might need that grievance someday. It might come in handy at some point. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

Anger as you know has been having a moment of late. Honestly, anger has been having a moment for years now. We along with the rest of the world have found so many reasons to be angry, not simply in general but at or with others. *They* have done terrible things. *They* have been awful. I'm guessing that if we're honest, many of us would admit that we are not happy with the idea of God's grace being poured out on *them*, whoever *they* may be. Like Jonah, we church types know that God is "a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy."⁴ And when pressed, if we're honest, we may confess that it frustrates the squat out of us. We might admit that yes, God's determination to being slow to

³ Mary Ann McKibben Dana, *Hope: A User's Manual*, p. 69.

⁴ Jonah 4:2, CEB

act in anger makes us angry at times. Even if *they* repent, *they* do not deserve God's mercy. *They* do not deserve God's love. My anger is quite justified, thank you very much. I'll keep it right here, tucked in my pocket where I can keep it warm.

"But is your anger a *good* thing?" God insists on asking Jonah, and, really, me, again. God is not shaming Jonah, nor is God shaming me. The truth is that God loves the Ninevites, God loves Jonah, and God loves me. God does not love the Ninevites *because* they repent. No, God longs for them to repent, to turn away from their love of violence and vengeance and toward him *because* he loves them. Not one Ninevite is disposable or expendable in God's eyes. And neither is Jonah. Nor am I. God longs for all of God's beloved children to repent from the violence, the ugliness, the vindictiveness that we cling to so tightly. God longs for us to turn and follow where God leads, which it so happens is toward **THE** good thing, back toward God and the life God intends for all of God's children.

The days ahead may be tricky for us as a nation. There are those who are gleeful this morning, and there are those who are frightened. There are some who are bitter, and there are some who are gloating. *They* are beloved one and all. *We* are beloved one and all. Whether we like it or not. And God would love for all of them to repent, just as God would love for all of us to repent, to let go of all that we are nursing, to turn from the grudges we have tucked away for safe keeping, the anger we are attached to that does not bring us or anyone else joy. And—just as we heard moments ago when we baptized sweet baby Charles—God would love for us to turn back toward the God we know in Jesus Christ, the Light of the world—Jonahs and Ninevites and us included.

Life in Christ does not mean we will never grieve or that we will never be angry—God does make the plant grow to shade Jonah’s head while Jonah stews, after all. Life in Christ *does* call us to let the grace that God offers us in Jesus to reorient us to a life fueled by love, justice, and compassion. That invitation to reorientation happens not just once, but over and over and over again because the temptation to clutch my grievances under the shade of a pitiful plant is not a rare or isolated temptation but a repeated and persistent one. And God knows that my smugness, my anger, my grudges, my carefully tucked away grievances will not sustain me in the short run or the long haul, so God invites me to consider what will. God calls to me to turn from all that eats away at me and to turn toward all that is in fact good, pleasing, and holy in God’s sight. For it is God’s good love that sustains me, it is God’s good grace that saves me, it is God’s good mercy that enables me to let go of the things I have clutched too tightly, and it is God’s good and unwavering faithfulness that restores me and gets me back on my feet to participate in God’s holy work of healing the world. And God’s stubborn determination to turn me back toward what is good and right and gracious and loving is a very good thing, because truth be told there are many days when I cannot tell my right from my left either. Today and every day, it is the one good God who saves me. And it is God alone who offers me and everyone else anything and everything that can truly bring us and all of God’s children true and lasting joy.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.