



Lent 2010 **Jonah**

SHORT CIRCLES STUDY GUIDE

WEEK ONE JONAH 1v1-3

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

One night, as I’m settling down to read my three-year-old daughter stories before bed, she asks me to read from a book of children’s Bible stories that her grandmother has recently given her. I open the book to a random story: David and Goliath. Like most children’s books, there are enthusiastic and colorful pictures of all the characters—so for this story, a giant angry man stands ready to tear a puny little David limb by limb. I figure being pummeled by a giant might not be the best image to send her to sleep with, so I flip to the next story: Daniel in the lion’s den. Naturally, there are several ravenous lions, mouths agape, saliva dripping from their fangs, looking with hunger to the corner where Daniel is soiling himself out of fear. That doesn’t seem quite right either, so I turn the pages to another story: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Hmm.

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Why is it that certain biblical stories endure in our faith primarily as children’s stories?

Frederick Buechner offers us an interesting perspective in his book *The Hungering Dark*: “Not, I suspect, because children particularly want to read them, but more because their elders particularly do not want to read them or at least do not want to read them for what they actually say and so make them instead into fairy tales, which no one has to take seriously. But for all our stratagems, the legends, the myths continue to embody truths or intuitions which in the long run it is perhaps more dangerous to evade than to confront.”

Another possibility is that we give them to children because these stories ask us to believe the impossible. We’re much too hardened by reality for these kinds of stories; life teaches us early that the little guy rarely wins, that hungry animals bite, and that if you play with fire you usually get burned. But maybe children are the keepers of these stories because they are the only ones with an imagination capable of handling the truth—for God, even the impossible is possible.

And God is looking for people who will partner with him in making the impossible possible.

QUESTIONS

- Do you remember the first time you heard the story of Jonah? What do you remember about hearing this story as a child?
- Frederick Buechner suggests that there is something rich in the Bible stories that we give to children that adults would rather not hear. What about Jonah's story is difficult for people to hear? What about it is difficult for you?
- Has God ever asked you to try something that seems impossible?

As for Jonah, nothing could be more impossible than being sent to Nineveh. Jonah is a Hebrew prophet, an Israelite; Nineveh is the capital of Assyria—a powerful neighboring nation with a long history of brutality, war and conquest. In fact, in 722 B.C.E. Assyria crushed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, sending its people into exile and wiping it off the map forever. The Assyrians are the enemy. They are the very ones threatening God's people. Nineveh is a dark, wicked place. Yet God tells Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me." [Jonah 1v2, NASB]

In Hebrew, however, this passage can be translated differently. "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry out concerning it, for its wickedness has come up before my face."

God isn't just sending Jonah to cry out against Nineveh.
God is sending Jonah to cry out concerning Nineveh.
God looks to Nineveh, the dark, wicked city, and is concerned.

For God to send Jonah to Nineveh would be like God telling a present day Jewish rabbi, "Go to Tehran the great city, and cry out concerning it." Or to a South Korean pastor, "Go to Pyongyang the great city, and cry out concerning it."

This seems like an unthinkable task to Jonah, requiring him to believe that God's love extends even to the enemy. God is concerned about what happens in the darkest corners of the earth, and he sends his people to be a presence in those dark places.

QUESTIONS

- Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies. He doesn't say, "if you have enemies, then you should love them." The assumption is that having enemies is a part of what it means to be human in a fractured world. Who are the people you regard as enemies, whether past or present? Why?
- Does extending God's love to an enemy seem risky? Why?
- When you think about Jesus' life, how do you see him loving his enemies?
- How is God calling you to be a presence in the midst of your enemies and to cry out concerning them?

Immediately, without hesitation, Jonah arises as he has been commanded. But he doesn't go to Nineveh. Instead he takes off for the Mediterranean coast to catch the first ship headed to Tarshish.

Nineveh is located in present day Iraq.

Tarshish is in Southern Spain, at the other end of Jonah's world.

The journey by ship would take almost a year and would have been extremely expensive and very dangerous. Not only is Tarshish about as far as Jonah can get from Nineveh, but in the ancient world, people thought of Tarshish like we think of Tahiti or Hawaii. It is an escape, and it seems there is no price that Jonah isn't willing to pay to escape.

Most of us know the way to Tarshish.

Like Jonah, we've paid the fare at one point or another. The escape to Tarshish for some people takes the form of shopping, where the temporary fascination with something new takes your mind off of Nineveh. For others there is the workplace—going to work or bringing work home keeps them from having to ever really be home. Others retreat inside; they escape by isolating themselves from everyone around them, keeping everyone at arm's length. Some fill their lives with busy-ness to ignore their inner dissatisfaction with life; some escape in pornography, a sense of intimacy without any strings.

Tarshish is all around us, and we go there often.

But the truth, Eugene Peterson says, is simply this: "Tarshish is a lie". The release, the distraction, the satisfaction of escape is only a temporary and fleeting fix. You can only run for so long before you realize that life on this

side of the fence is quickly becoming just like life was back on that side of the fence. The common denominator, of course, is you. Your own heart. As the saying goes, wherever you go, there you are.

The world doesn't need people who are good at jumping fences. It needs people who know how to turn brown grass green—people who go to Nineveh. God is inviting us to embrace the darkness, both our own shadows and the shadows in the world around us.

You will always find God in the darkness, in the wickedness, in the broken cracks and crevices of the world. Those places come up before God's face, and he is concerned. God wants to meet you in Nineveh, and in that seemingly impossible place, he wants to change everything.

QUESTIONS

- How do you escape? What is your Tarshish?
- What do you think it looks like to enter into your own suffering?

Why do we run? Jonah isn't the first prophet to be on the run. Moses did some running of his own. Moses had murdered an Egyptian, and when it becomes known, he flees to the wilderness. Moses ran from his past. Elijah did some running too. He flees to the wilderness after defeating the prophets of Baal, afraid because Queen Jezebel wants him dead. Elijah ran out of fear.

But Jonah's running was different. The Hebrew phrase used to describe Jonah's running is *mi lifnei*. It suggests a rupture of contact, a turning of one's back. It means flat out rebellion. In fact, the same phrase is used to describe Cain's departure from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 4v16, "So Cain went out of the LORD's presence and settled in the land of Nod, East of Eden." Notice how Jonah 1v2 repeats the phrase "away from the presence of the LORD" twice. Whenever biblical writers, especially Hebrew writers, want you to get the point, they repeat words or phrases multiple times.

Jonah runs because he thinks he knows better than God about how the world ought to work. As far as Jonah is concerned, "those people" in Nineveh don't deserve a warning. The only thing God ought to be concerned about for Nineveh is destroying them once and for all. In a way, Jonah's running is about control. Jonah escapes to Tarshish under the illusion that he can somehow control God, or at the very least thwart what it is that God wants to do.

According to Eugene Peterson, "A curious thing happens when we get a taste of God. It happened first in Eden and it keeps happening. The experience of God—the ecstasy, the wholeness of it—is accompanied by a temptation to

reproduce the experience as God. The taste for God is debased into a greed to be God." [Under the Unpredictable Plant, Eugene Peterson]

So as Jonah settles in for the long journey to Tarshish, he appears to have everything under control. His plan is working, but there are clouds in the distance.

QUESTIONS

- As Eugene Peterson points out, most of us live with the illusion that we're in control. We give lip service to God but often trust in ourselves more than we trust in God. In what ways do you trust in your own power rather than God's?
- Why is it so hard to trust in God rather than ourselves?
- When have you had control taken away from you? How did it make you feel?

WEEK TWO JONAH 1v4-17

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us and we will not perish."

Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

He answered, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" [They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.] The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

Then they cried to the LORD, “O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased.” Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

Prophets led peculiar lives. They cried out against injustice, wrongdoing and evil. They regularly reminded Israel of the ways in which it was failing to be the nation that God had called it to be. And prophets weren’t afraid to name names. Consequently, they were usually at odds with the people of Israel, especially those in positions of power and authority. The Israelites didn’t appreciate being disrupted by the truth that God’s dream for the world was vastly different from their own. In fact, the book of Isaiah records that “The people say to the seers, ‘See no more visions!’ And to the prophets, ‘Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things! Prophecy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel.’”

There were prophets in the Old Testament who did just that. These false prophets told the people what they wanted to hear: Jerusalem is God’s Holy City, it can never be conquered, don’t listen to these clowns telling you that unless you change your ways God is going to send judgment—they don’t know what they’re talking about.

The Israelites preferred false prophets to true prophets.

They preferred a god who conformed to their own agenda, and they surrounded themselves with false prophets who supported their version of God.

It’s a kind of idolatry that happens still. We maintain illusions about how we think the world works, how we think God works, and we don’t like being confronted with the idea that God doesn’t operate according to our different agendas. Some of us hold fast to the illusion that life is fair, that people can simply work hard, pull themselves up by the bootstraps and do anything in this world they set their minds to.

Those of us who hold to this illusion don’t like to hear Jesus’ parable about the workers in the vineyard: Some workers worked a full day while others worked only an hour, but both were paid the same. Nor do we like Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son who runs off and blows his inheritance and gets welcomed home with a party.

Jesus is clear: life isn’t fair. The world doesn’t run according to our own efforts. It runs according to the mercy of God, who, in his kindness, gives to every person as he chooses, and then expects those he blesses to turn around and be a blessing to others.

We hold fast to the illusion that we are in control, that somehow by playing all our cards in just the right way, we can get the world and everyone in it, including God, to conform to our agenda. It’s no surprise that we feel the most fear and anxiety when control is taken away from us. We believe that if we play by the rules and keep our noses clean that no evil will ever befall us, that if we do A, B, and C as we raise our children, that they will turn out perfect and make good choices.

Then there is the illusion that God is for certain people, people like us, and against certain others, people not like us. We think of “them people” and “those people” in the same way Jonah thinks of the Ninevites. Whatever illusions we have, we use them to shape God in whatever way is most convenient for us, and of course, anyone who disagrees with us isn’t really disagreeing with us. They’re disagreeing with God.

One of the most interesting aspects of Jesus’ ministry was that he was constantly disrupting people’s notions of what God was like. Allowing ourselves to be disrupted and surprised that God is different than we think is a significant part of growing in the faith. Jonah is disrupted by the call to Nineveh. The Pharisees and religious leaders were disrupted by Jesus’ affiliation with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. We need to pay attention to those moments when God disrupts us.

QUESTIONS

- We may be hesitant or unwilling to see our own illusions, but we tend to be experts at seeing them in other people. How do you see people shaping God in their own image?
- In what ways do you think you have shaped God in your image?
- When have you been disrupted by God? When have you experienced God to be different from what you thought?

While Jonah is never called a false prophet, he has some illusions of his own. Namely, the illusion that he can control God by running away to Tarshish, and the illusion that God’s love only extends to Israel.

In the ancient world, a god’s greatness depended on things like power, might,

and the survival of that god's people. Showing compassion to Nineveh, Israel's enemy, would show that the God of Israel was weak. "A tribal god was petitioned to slay the tribe's enemies because he was conceived as the god of that tribe and not as the god of the enemies." [Heschel, *The Prophets*]

Picture Jonah staring out at the sea, completely oblivious to the fact that the wind is starting to pick up and the waves are growing by the minute. He's probably muttering something on the order of, "He can't be serious. I won't let him do it. I'll hide out in Tarshish for a while." Thinking he has everything under control, Jonah goes below deck to sleep. Then it happens. The Scriptures say that the LORD sends such a violent wind that the ship threatens to break into pieces on the open sea. The sailors have no doubt seen their fair share of storms before, but this is different. They are terrified and start throwing cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Finally, they simply resort to calling out to their gods, none of which seemed to be listening.

The captain goes below deck and finds Jonah sleeping. "Get up and call on your god!"

And at this point, the drama of the story moves so quickly that we often miss something vital. Everyone is praying, and the captain asks Jonah, a prophet of the Lord, to pray. But Jonah remains silent. Most of the time when reading the Bible, we finish one sentence and simply begin reading the next.

We don't always recognize the significance of silence in the story.

Imagine that a woman says to a man, "I love you." But instead of saying "I love you too," the man smiles faintly and gives the woman an awkward hug. His silence is clear; he does not love her and can't bring himself to say it. The same kind of thing is at work here with Jonah. In this moment, his silence is his way of saying to God, "Over my dead body—I'll go to the bottom of the sea before I go to Nineveh." Somehow, with the ship rocking to and fro, the sailors manage to cast lots and find out that the storm was because of Jonah. But Jonah doesn't give up his illusions easily. Instead, he tells the sailors to throw him overboard.

Illusions are like that. We don't give them up easily. In fact, we don't normally give them up at all until they stop working for us altogether. And like Jonah, sometimes the only thing that can save us is to be thrown overboard, to have our illusions stripped away. There are storms that blow up out of nowhere and upset our agendas. We get brought to our knees by suffering.

And in many ways, storms bring with them a kind of salvation. They rescue us from ourselves because we are never more open to God's bigness than when we are most aware of our own smallness and helplessness. Storms mess with our agendas. Suffering, more than anything, shapes us in the way of

Jesus. It softens us and opens us to a kind of Christ-likeness that we wouldn't experience otherwise.

Jonah's hang up is that he doesn't want to face the darkness in Nineveh, but one wonders if he's running just as much from the darkness in himself. God is inviting us to give up our petty illusions. When we say that someone is disillusioned, what we often mean is that they are cynical or pessimistic. They've had a rough go of things and have stopped hoping and only see the negative in things. In part, that's true. Our hopes and expectations can only be crushed so many times before we simply give them up all together. Better to not be disappointed than to get let down again.

Yet it seems that God is looking for disillusioned people because they're the only ones who stand a chance at seeing the world as he sees it. God is longing for people to move "from illusion to prayer, from false certainty to true uncertainty, and from the many safe gods to the God whose love has no limit." [Nouwen, *Reaching Out*] But for the moment, Jonah is so deeply entrenched in his illusions that he simply refuses to pray.

QUESTIONS

- Why do you think suffering "opens us to a kind of Christ-likeness that wouldn't otherwise be possible"?
- What do you think it means to move from "false certainty to true uncertainty"?
- What storms have you faced in your life that reshaped how you understood God and the world?

WEEK THREE JONAH 2v1-10

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit. "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.' " And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

There is a story in the gospel of Mark that is fascinating in its similarities to Jonah's adventure on the boat. In Mark 4v35-40, Jesus and his disciples are on a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee when a raging storm threatens to sink the boat.

Like Jonah, Jesus is asleep down below.

Like Jonah, Jesus is awakened by his terrified companions.

Unlike Jonah, Jesus doesn't remain silent. He speaks up, and the sea becomes calm. Jonah knew that if he prayed the sea would become calm, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Prayer plays a significant role in the story of Jonah. On three separate occasions people who are in trouble cry out to God—first the sailors on the ship, then Jonah in the belly of the fish, and finally in chapter 3 the Ninevites cry out to God. In all three cases, God is quick to respond.

Prayer is an odd topic. Most everyone would agree that it's a necessary part of a healthy life in God. Yet so many people feel inadequate when it comes to prayer. We're not good at prayer, we say. There's a long list of reasons that keep us from praying, and because of that, the topic of prayer can easily leave people feeling guilty, shamed, and inferior. We're tempted to think that the solution to the dilemma of prayer in our lives is simply to try harder—praying more and with more passion. Yet despite our best efforts, we often find ourselves back at square one.

QUESTIONS

- What kinds of things keep you from praying?
- How have you been disappointed by prayer in your life?

What we need is an entirely new way of thinking about prayer, and one of the more shocking pieces of the story of Jonah is that God uses a man who blatantly refuses to pray to teach us one of the most poignant lessons on prayer in all the Scriptures.

Surprisingly, none of the words in Jonah's prayer are original. Instead, he borrows every last one straight out of the Psalms [3, 5, 18, 30, 42, 69, 120, and 139]. For as long as the Psalms have been around, people of faith have used them to learn how to pray, and it's simple enough to understand why: there are moments in our lives when we simply don't know what to say to God—moments when we're so angry, so confused, or so flat out uninspired that we can't choke out even the simplest prayer. In such moments, the Psalms become words of life.

When you can't find your own words, borrow someone else's.

When you can't find your own hope, borrow someone else's.

Time and time again, people find themselves staring at the songs that are sung on Sundays, unable to sing the words. The fact of the matter is that there are moments when our heart does not choose to say, Lord, blessed be your name. And in those moments, it's the community around us, singing My heart will choose to say, Lord, blessed be your name that gives us the courage and the faith to keep on trusting. Praying borrowed words has a way of guiding us into the presence of God in those moments when we can't seem to find the way ourselves.

But there is more.

One of the great mysteries of the Christian story is that words have a way of becoming flesh. In Hebrew, *davar* means "word", but it also means "event". Words don't simply convey ideas. They also make things happen, just as God's speaking in Genesis 1 made creation happen. They have the capacity to get loose in a person and rattle around inside them for weeks on end, sometimes for a lifetime. These are the kinds of words that don't let you alone—they linger, they nag at you until you change. They literally become flesh. So Jonah, with his back against an intestinal wall, recalls the Psalms and weaves these borrowed words into a prayer.

QUESTIONS

- What are some words that you have found yourself coming back to again and again in your life? How have those words helped shape you?
- When in your life have you not known what to say to God?

There are basically two kinds of Psalms: Psalms of lament and Psalms of thanksgiving. Everything about Jonah's situation points to lament. He's angry. He's on the verge of death. But Jonah, remembering the Psalms, prays a prayer of thanksgiving. It's an odd choice.

A similar thing occurs in the book of Job. In one twenty-four hour period Job loses everything: His vast wealth gets stolen by thieves, all of his servants are killed—except for the few who live to tell him what happened—and every last one of his children is killed in a freak windstorm. It is immediate and overwhelming loss, and Job's response is not what you would expect.

"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.'" [Job 1v20-21, TNIV]

Both Jonah's prayer and Job's worship are so counter-intuitive, unexpected. Who gets swallowed by a fish and prays a prayer of thanksgiving? Who loses everything and falls to the ground in worship?

In the midst of overwhelming sadness and hopelessness, Jonah reaches into the rich history of prayer and prays words of hope and trust. This prayer might be the greatest truth that gets revealed by Jonah's life:

Prayer helps us live into truths that we sometimes don't feel or can't see.

The truth that, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary:
God is in control.
God can be trusted.
God hears the prayers that rise up to him out of the depths; they come up before his face, and he is concerned.

In the Jewish community, a mourner prays the mourner's prayer every day for a calendar year. The prayer itself has nothing to do with grief. Instead it's a prayer about the character of God. The idea is that the mourner may not feel the words to be true, yet, somehow, surrounded by a group of friends praying the prayer every day for a year, that mourner learns to live into the truth of the prayer.

In our moments of sadness, confusion, and anxiety, praying Psalms of thanksgiving helps us move beyond our helplessness into the realm of God's helpfulness. They move us out of our own smallness and into God's bigness. Whatever our circumstance, the Psalms show us the way when we can't find it on our own.

There is only one problem. Jonah never says anything about Nineveh or his running. He doesn't apologize. He doesn't repent. He doesn't say he'll go to Nineveh. And judging from what we've seen of him so far, his omission is suspicious.

So which is it?

Are his words sincere?
Is he a changed man?
Or is he simply saying all the right things?
Or, as is so often the case, is it a little of both at the same time?

Maybe one of the most precious gifts of the story of Jonah is that God so often works in the world through people who are a curious mixture of dignity and depravity, sincerity and selfishness. Either way, his prayer comes up before God, and God commands the fish, and it vomits Jonah onto the dry land.

QUESTIONS

- Read Psalm 9 [a Psalm of thanksgiving] out loud together. As you listen to the words, pay attention to the phrases that catch your attention. What in the Psalm moves you? What in the Psalm did you need to hear right now in your life?
- Now read Psalm 13 [a Psalm of lament] out loud, and pay attention to the phrases that catch your attention. What in the Psalm moves you? What in the Psalm did you need to hear in your life right now?
- In what ways has prayer helped you find hope in the midst of hopelessness?

WEEK FOUR JONAH 3v1-10

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

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. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." 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.

The Bible doesn't say anything about Jonah's long walk from the Mediterranean coast to Nineveh, only that the fish vomits him onto the dry land, and that he goes to Nineveh.

Three days in the belly of the fish and a long walk is a lot of time to think.

What does Jonah think about as he makes the long trek?
Is he so grateful to be alive that every step felt like a gift?
Or does he stew over his conviction that Nineveh doesn't deserve so much as

a second thought from God, let alone a second chance?

The Bible doesn't say. It simply says that this time, he went.

One thing is clear: Jonah despises Nineveh, and maybe for good reason. It turns out that Nineveh isn't the only city in the Scriptures whose wickedness was so great that it caught God's attention. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was so grievous that God decided to "go and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me." We understand from the Bible that things in Sodom and Gomorrah were really bad, and because Nineveh's wickedness comes up before God in the same way, things in Nineveh must have been really bad too.

And things in Nineveh were bad. So bad that the prophet Nahum spoke of it: "The city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots. Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over corpses—all because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft." [Nahum 3v1-4, NIV]

Who can blame Jonah for not wanting to go?

It's easy for us to focus so much on the fact that Jonah is finally on the same page as God that we forget just how bad things are in Nineveh. You could mistake Nahum's description of Nineveh for the atrocities in Congo: forced labor, systematic rape, and human trafficking. And it's not about personal sin—if you read to the end of Jonah chapter 4, God mentions the animals of Nineveh. It's a strange detail and a sad one because sin always extends beyond us to the people and things around us, even creation. In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve had taken the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God made garments of skins to cover their nakedness. Where did the skins come from but from animals? God had to kill for Adam and Eve's sin. One of the tricks we play on ourselves is that our sin isn't so bad as long as we aren't hurting anyone else. But we're so connected to each other and the world around us that our sin always reaches out beyond us. It always has implications for others.

QUESTIONS

- Does everyone deserve a second chance?
- How would you feel if you were Jonah, making your way into a city of depravity?
- In what ways have you been impacted by someone else's sin?
- When have you seen your own sin have consequences for other people?

Whether Jonah learned to share God's concern for Nineveh or just went out of obligation, the miracle is that he goes at all. He walks into the heart of darkness and begins making his way up and down the city streets proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

In Hebrew, the number 40 is symbolic of an extended period of time. The great flood of Genesis lasted 40 days, the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness lasted 40 days. God is giving the Ninevites an extended period of time before overturning the city.

It's a warning.

Word of Jonah's warning starts spreading through the city. The news even makes its way to the king, who, upon hearing it, does something totally unexpected and unbecoming of a king: He gets off his throne, takes off his royal robes, puts on sackcloth, covers himself in ashes and sits low in the dust. He sends a royal decree throughout the city declaring that everyone fast and wear sackcloth—even the animals.

In the Jewish tradition, Nineveh's response to God is held up as a shining example of true repentance. The Jewish sages suggest that the repentance of Nineveh was so sincere and far reaching that "even someone who had stolen a beam and built it into his house destroyed the entire building and returned the beam to its owner". [Jonah, JPS, 1999]

Verse 10 says that "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

The Hebrew word for "turn" is the word *shuv*. It means "to turn", but it also means "to return". Repentance—true, life altering repentance—is about more than just dying to sin. It's also about returning to the kind of life we were created for. Repentance is about stopping and going, dying and living, giving up and taking on. It is surrender and liberation all at once.

God's compassion in the story of Jonah is not random. It's aroused by the repentance of the sailors and the Ninevites. It triggers something in God that he can't resist. "Repentance has an explosive impact upon God; God is highly sensitive to repentance. He responds vigorously to repentance even at the slightest hint of it, even if a person has committed terrible sins." [*Meet the Rabbis* by Brad Young, Hendrickson Publishers, 2007]

There is a Jewish tale about the power of repentance in which King Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings in Judah's history, repented and sought God's favor. According to the tale, the ministering angels in heaven were so outraged at Manasseh's sin that they blocked his prayer from entering God's heavenly court. But God ripped a hole in his own throne to make a way for Manasseh's prayer to reach him.

God is just waiting for us to return to him.

Repentance was at the heart of everything Jesus did. Everywhere he went, he preached "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" [Matthew 4v17, TNIV]. And it was repentance that Jesus was talking about when he referred to the sign of Jonah in Matthew 12. In that passage, some Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus to give them a sign. Jesus responded by saying, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here." [Matthew 12v39-41, TNIV]

The pagan sailors and the bloodthirsty Ninevites repented, but Jonah, a Hebrew prophet, a leader, never seems to come around. He is hard-hearted and stubborn to the very end. And when Jesus, the Son of God, comes to earth, it's the leaders of the faith, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who refuse to accept his message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Both the story of Jonah and the life and ministry of Jesus are centered on the powerful act of repentance. They are an invitation to turn from sin and return to the life that God created us for.

That's why Jonah is such an appropriate story for us to explore during Lent. Lent is a season in which Christians look into their lives and ask, "What do I need to die to? What are the habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living that I need to leave behind?" Because God created us for so much more.

But we don't just leave things behind, we replace them with new habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living.

We replace death with life.

We exchange hearts of stone for hearts of flesh.

We turn and we return.

QUESTIONS

- What new habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living do you want in your life?
- What habits, patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking, speaking, and living do you want to leave behind?

One of the most powerful images of repentance in this chapter of Jonah is the king of Nineveh getting off his throne. It's an acknowledgment that he's not in control, that there is Someone else who belongs in that seat. Repentance is a way of getting off the throne of our own lives, of stepping down and confessing that we are not capable of living the redeemed kind of life God created us for when we try to do it under our own power.

Jonah's invitation to Nineveh, and Jesus' invitation to us is to repent.

God is just waiting for people to turn from their sin and return to him. The question is, "How will we respond?" Will we respond like the sailors and the Ninevites or like Jonah? Will we respond like the sinners and tax collectors of Jesus' day or like the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

"We have grown accustomed to sin, and the fragments of scripture lie shattered in our life; charity has withered with calculation, and the sparks of purity have burnt out. Yet still we come on Yom Kippur [or during Lent], and God who said, 'I have forgiven' whispers it again to us, and waits for our reply.

What shall it be? What form will it take?

Let us repair what can still be repaired.

Let us give back the gain we earned by injustice.

Let us make peace with our injured brother.

Let us restore the person we wronged.

Let us admit what is false in ourselves.

Let us put right what is wrong in our family life.

Let us not sour the joy of living.

May God give us the courage to do these things and help us to rebuild our lives. And when we have finished our tasks, may He permit us to enjoy the

light sown for the righteous so that He can delight in us. The Gates of His Mercy are still open. Let us enter.”[From *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship III: Prayers for the High Holidays of Awe*. 8th ed. 5745, London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1985.]

QUESTIONS

- Why do you think it was so hard for Jonah and the Pharisees and teachers of the law to accept God’s invitation to repent?
- Why do you think it can be so hard to repent?

WEEK FIVE JONAH 4v1-4

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”

Jonah is past frustrated.
He is beyond upset.
He is angry.

So angry that for the second time in this story he would rather die than live in the reality that God has created.

Jonah says one of the reasons he is angry is because God is “a God who relents from sending calamity”. The word calamity means great loss or lasting distress, or maybe we could just say lasting tragedy. When we think of lasting tragedy, it’s easy to remember the people of Haiti, hit with an earthquake earlier this year that left thousands of men, women, and children dead and thousands more without food, water, or a place to sleep. An entire city in utter distress for many years to come and with very little hope to cling to.

This is calamity. And this is what Jonah hopes for the people of Nineveh? I think it is safe to assume that the roots of Jonah’s anger run very deep.

This kind of anger isn’t built overnight.

In fact the Hebrew word for anger is the word *chara*. Not only does it mean anger but it also means, “to burn”. Jonah’s anger is a seething, bubbling kind of rage just below the surface. It’s the kind of anger that has been around for

a long time and could explode through the surface at any moment. Minor infractions lead to volcanic eruptions of rage. Recently, I was having one of those days. The kind that start spinning out of control as soon as you lift your head from the pillow. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. First it’s the car, then it’s the kids, then it’s the toilet and on and on it goes. By mid-day I’m storming my way through the kitchen on my way to fix the car when my wife asks me if I can take the trash out.

Can I take the trash out?
You want me to take the trash out?
Do you have any idea what my day has been like?
How dare you!

I explode with fragments of sentences and accusations at a ridiculous volume because now suddenly everything that is wrong with my day is the result of her asking me to take the trash out. All the while my wife stares at me with this look on her face like: Who are you?

That is *chara*. The seething, bubbling river of rage just below the surface.

My rant had nothing to do with the trash [which I took out]. But it was an outlet for my blame and frustration. When we get angry, we quickly look around us to find the cause of our condition, so that everything that is wrong with our situation can be the fault of... that, him, her. Anger is an indicator; it alerts us to the fact that something is not right. Anger is to the person what pain is to the body. Our first impulse is to locate the source of our anger outside of ourselves—that person made me angry, those people made me angry—but more often than not, anger is an indication that something is wrong inside us.

The rant had to do with me. There was a storm that was building. I was losing control of my day and I didn’t like that feeling. I like to be in control. When things don’t go the way I want them to, I get angry.

Maybe the same is true for Jonah. He is looking around to find the cause of his condition and there stands Nineveh. But maybe this is about more than Nineveh.

Last year, I spent a week visiting with family that I don’t see very often. Family is great; family is also one of the places where you are almost certain to find *chara*. One evening, I’m having a conversation with a belligerent family member who is livid at another family member, and taking the opportunity to tell me about it. For twenty minutes, this person erupts with a litany of reasons for not liking another family member. “She said this. She did this,” and the list goes on. After several minutes of ranting, I finally say, “You know, in my experience what we hate in other people is really a reflection of what

we hate in ourselves.” Silence. Then our conversation takes an unexpected turn. “I’m a terrible parent,” he says. “I don’t know my son. I live with my parents. I’m in failing health. I don’t have a job. I guess it’s hard to love your neighbor as yourself when you don’t even love yourself.”

I was speaking to a belligerent family member, but I felt like I was speaking with Jonah himself.

This is a man—who claims to speak for God—and he is enraged that God has shown grace and mercy to a city of people. It doesn’t seem to match up. You would think that a person who speaks for God would have an idea of how God works. But, again, maybe that is the problem. Jonah responds to God saying, “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

Like many of us, Jonah isn’t getting his way. He doesn’t want “Gracious, Compassionate God” he wants “Angry, Bring the Calamity God”. He wants justice to be served. But he is not getting his way and it leaves him angry. A counselor once said to me, “anger is rooted in fear”. Often what we are really angry about is our fears coming true.

Is Jonah afraid that God is a softy?
Afraid that God shows grace to the just and unjust?
Afraid that God looks at him and Nineveh with the same love and compassion?

Afraid that all of his efforts to be righteous would not separate him from the people of Nineveh, but rather bring him closer to them?

QUESTIONS

- What things have you seen in others that made you angry only to later find those same things in yourself?
- If you look just behind or underneath your anger, what fear might be associated or connected to it?

Jonah and Nineveh are more alike than Jonah wants to admit. Jonah, in the belly of the fish, cries out for God’s grace and mercy, and God delivers him. Nineveh cries the same cry to the same God and God responds in the same way. Grace. Jonah and Nineveh are in need of the same thing from the same God. He is his enemy, and his enemy is him.

His reality is flipped upside down and he finds himself in a place he is familiar with, feeling that same itch to get away—wanting to escape it all, wanting to run and not look back. And ultimately, Jonah wants to die, which

is really just another form of escape. In the same way that Jonah ran to Tarshish, he is running still.

When we begin to take a long hard look inside ourselves for the root of our anger we start to see things we may or may not like; things like fear and self-hatred.

Maybe Jonah is running from himself. And no matter how far he runs, he will always have to keep running.

Because wherever he goes, there he is.

Maybe like Jonah, we’re angry. Maybe we’re on the run. And the more we run the more we distance ourselves from the grace that is waiting.

It is time to stop running.

Because if we choose to hang on to our anger, we will soon learn that it will follow us wherever we go. And after we have exhausted every option out there, we are only left with what is in here, what is in us.

There is great comfort to me in the truth that God does not change. God is the same now for us as he was then for Jonah, for Nineveh. His grace has not run out. And maybe it’s when we accept that grace for ourselves that we are finally able to extend it to others.

QUESTIONS

- Where or to whom in your life have you been showing anger where instead you should be extending grace?
- In what ways do you desire grace and mercy to be extended to you?

WEEK SIX JONAH 4v5-11

Jonah went 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. Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 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.”

But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

For most of us, the basic story of Jonah is that he disobeyed and then obeyed. But there is an ending to the story that most of us have either missed or simply never heard. It's a brilliant and unsettling ending.

The people of Nineveh are everything Jonah despises about humanity. To him they represent all that is wrong with this world. So the thought of them being shown grace leaves him angry. His anger seems personal though. Nineveh is his enemy. They have gone to war with his people. Have they killed people that he had possibly known or even loved?

In Jonah's mind I think "calamity" for them equals "justice" for him. And he wants justice.

A lot of us can relate to this moment. That moment when we are secretly happy when things fall apart for another person. A friend I have was telling me about one of her coworkers [that I knew she despised] who had been caught stealing and was fired. The story didn't bother me; it was the way she told it: with a big smile of satisfaction. She found great joy in this person's misfortune. Not unlike many of us do. But when we start to justify the destruction of another person or a group of people to satisfy our personal desires we have a problem. Our desires begin to contradict God's desires.

QUESTIONS

- When was a time that you hoped for something bad to happen to a person? Why did you hope this?
- What could be different about the situation now?

Ultimately, the story of Jonah is about God and what he is like. What his desires for the world are. It's a story that puts Jonah's desire alongside God's desire and builds to a question: Will God's desires become Jonah's desires? Will God's hope for the world become Jonah's heart for the world?

In chapter 4v2, Jonah describes God as a "gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." This phrase is used word for word to describe what God is like all

over the Old Testament. Moses uses it. The prophet Joel uses it. God's character is grace and compassion. The Hebrew word for compassion is "*rachum*." It means "soft or gentle" and refers to the kind of love that a father has for his children.

When our daughter was ten months old, a bacterial infection located in one of her lymph nodes. Within hours a massive growth was protruding from her neck. After a long night in the ER, we came home and tried to put her to bed, but the pain in her neck was so intense that she could only sleep sitting upright with her head resting on something. So, like any father would, I sat up all night in a chair, holding her forehead in the palm of my hand so that she could sleep. That is *rachum*. That's the kind of thing a father does for his children because of his intense love for them. It's a beautiful picture. It's the kind of story that makes us go awww.

But we shouldn't miss the irony because God extends that kind of love to the people in Nineveh. These folks have murdered and killed. They've cracked whips on the backs of slave laborers. Yet God holds these people in the palm of his hand and sits up all night with them because of his *rachum*.

Jonah is not okay with God's extravagant love being available for all people. So he leaves the city and finds a place to sit and watch what will happen to the city. He fully expects that Nineveh will backslide, even hopes they will. Jonah sits down because he wants a front row seat to watch God wipe these people off the map. He is sitting and waiting, watching for his sweet justice to finally come.

But while he waits it becomes extremely hot and God causes a plant to grow behind him to give him the shade he needs.

Now if you are like me you are reading that part of the story saying, Wait, you gave him shade? Jonah finds a seat and is waiting to throw God's actions back in his face and say Ha! I told you so, I told you that you were wrong—and God makes him more comfortable? Jonah cannot wait to prove God wrong and God's response is, need an umbrella? Sure you're comfy? Can I get you anything? This feels a bit like getting slapped in the face and then saying, "I'm so sorry, did that hurt your hand? Are you ok?"

Jonah is waiting to enjoy his justice and God responds with grace and mercy. The irony here is that God is showing Jonah grace while Jonah sits and hopes for God's grace to fall apart for Nineveh. As if it is somehow good enough for him, but not for them.

And I think that word is the key here: "them". Those people, over there, that group, them. The word "them" often carries with it an idea of separation. There is "us" and then there is "them". And often when "them" is used to

describe our enemies, they get stripped of their humanity. They begin to represent something that is less than human. Something we can hate and not feel bad about because it is justified.

God says to Jonah “Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.” What an odd way to describe people. But this was actually a common Hebrew way of referring to children under the age of seven. God is saying to Jonah, “There are 120,000 children in that city, should I not care for them?”

God reminds Jonah that his enemies are human.

It’s so easy to get wrapped up in revenge, isn’t it? We begin to hope for crazy things.

QUESTIONS

- When is a time that you have viewed someone as less than human?
- When was a time that you wanted revenge? Did you get it? If so, how did it make you feel?
- If anger can be describe as our will being blocked then we have to ask ourselves, what is our will? What do we want? And more importantly, why do we want it?

Jonah’s hope for Nineveh’s misfortune is contrasted with the attributes of God described in verse 2: gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love. The one who speaks on behalf of God is not reflecting the same desires as God. Jonah has a different hope. Jonah’s will looks different than God’s will.

The question we have to ask ourselves at some point is “Is what God wants for this world compelling to us?”

Do we want the same things that God wants?

Maybe you’ve watched a movie where the character needed to make a certain choice. The whole story has been about that character working up the courage to make the right choice, and as you’ve watched the movie, you got involved too. Then comes that climactic moment at the very end where all the character has to do is say the words, and you’re on the edge of your seat screaming inside [or, like my wife, out loud at the television], “Say it! Say it!” Then, just as the character begins to open his or her mouth, the credits roll, at which point you do scream at the television, “NO!”

Endings like that drive us crazy. Great stories tend to end this way. They don’t

resolve. We’re left sitting in the tension wondering what happened. Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son ends in a similar way. In the final scene of Jesus’ parable, the father is pleading with his older son to come join the party that is being thrown for his younger brother. But the story ends before the older son makes a choice, and we’re left wondering, Does he go into the party? Or does he sit outside and sulk?

Ending stories like this is actually a very clever way for writers to jolt us out of the story and into our own lives. The question is not so much, Will Jonah come around? as it is, Will I come around? The question is not so much, Will the older brother ever join the party? The question is, Will I join the party? The very simple storyline of Jonah is this: God has a dream for the world. Jonah has a dream for the world. Those dreams are very different. God is compassionate. Jonah is angry. God invites Jonah to share his dream for the world, to exchange his anger for compassion. Will he? God extends that same invitation to us—to share his dreams for the world, to exchange our anger for compassion, grace, and mercy. Will we?

QUESTIONS

- So, what do you think God’s dream for the world you inhabit looks like? Is it compelling to you?
- What are a couple of things you can do to align your dream for the world closer to God’s dream for the world?