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Jonah 3-4

Second Message

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GRIEF IN GOD'S HEART

Last week, I presented a picture of Jonah the Prophet that was negative. I believe that he is presented in the Book of Jonah as being an example of what we as Christians ought *not* to be. This week, Jonah as a negative example continues but the setting changes. Last week, God used a storm at sea, a group of spiritually responsive pagan polytheists, and a great fish to try to get his prophet to change his heart. This week, God will use the spiritually responsive people (and cattle!) of Nineveh, a plant, a worm, and scorching hot wind to try to reach the heart of a prophet who is still consumed with suicidal hatred and self-absorption.

In Chapters 3-4 of Jonah, the scene shifts to Nineveh, that great city, the capital of Israel's tradition enemy, the Assyrians. While the drama of the repentance of the people of Nineveh is being played out, another (inconclusive) drama is presented: Will the stubborn heart of Jonah change? And, as I said last week, we will again confront the ultimate question of the Book of Jonah: Will you, the reader of the story, repent and thereby unleash the mighty compassion of God in your life, or will you remain stuck in your selfishness, petty hatreds, and rigid self-absorption?

To find an answer to these questions, let's get into the text.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. (Jonah 3:1-3a)

This time, Jonah goes to Nineveh. There are so many interpretive possibilities in these short verses! Notice that God's word to Jonah is slightly different than it was in 1:2. This time, Jonah is not told to cry out against the city for its wickedness or misery. Is this significant? Notice also that we are given no glimpse into the prophet's heart. He "arose and went" in accordance with God's word. Is this significant? What was in Jonah's heart? Are there clues here in the text that would tell us something if we could but see them?¹ From my perspective, Jonah's heart is still unrighteous. His actions are obedient, but, as we will soon see, he never once feels or says anything positive about his prophetic duty toward Nineveh. Of course, it may simply be that he doesn't want to spend any more time inside a fish! Better to just go.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. (3:3b-5)

Since it is unlikely that any ancient city (let alone a modern one) could actually be sixty or so miles across, it is most likely that the author of the story is doing one of two things. First, it is

possible that "Nineveh, the Great City" is referring to the entire area around the city. Saying "Nineveh, the Great City" might be like saying "The Greater San Jose Area." Second, and more likely, the author is comparing the numbers three and one to show us how quickly the people of Nineveh repented when they heard God's message from Jonah. Jonah only has to get through one-third of his preaching and his job is done! Everything in the account is abbreviated; it all happens very fast. A mere five Hebrew words² are used to summarize Jonah's message. The account of his preaching is covered in a single verse. Remember that this is completely unlike the other prophetic books of the OT. In them, chapter after chapter is devoted to "the word of the Lord" that a prophet delivers to his audience. Here, however, the author zips past "the word of the Lord" to get back to his narrative. He wants to focus on the repentance of the people of Nineveh.

Immediately upon hearing Jonah's message, the people of Nineveh "believed God." The content of this belief leads them to fast and wear sackcloth – i.e. rough clothing that shows their sorrow and grief. This grass-roots repentance movement seems like it ought to be enough for the people of Nineveh to show their repentance to one another, to God's prophet, and to God. But I believe that the author goes out of his way to show how silly and misinformed the repentance of the people of Nineveh is. Sometime after the people of Nineveh have begun to repent of their own accord, the king hears about what is going on. Solemnly, he joins in the occasion, and takes things a bit further: he sits in ashes. Thinking like a true politician, he passes an unnecessary law³ which requires, of all things, that "neither man nor beast, herd nor flock" should eat or drink anything. In addition, these animals were to be covered in sackcloth. Listen to the text:

Then tidings reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he made proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. (3:6-8)

I wonder if the king and the nobles thought that the animals were also supposed to cry mightily to God too! Just as we saw in Chapters 1-2 with the sailors, this text emphasizes the dramatic, complete, and profound nature of the repentance of the people of Nineveh. Once again, the hearts of every one (including the animals?) in the story show a spiritual responsiveness that any of us should like to have. Certainly it is true that the leaders of Nineveh could benefit from some lessons in the theology of re-

pentance. But I think the author intends this. It is more of the cartoon-like imagery we saw in Ch. 1. Now we have animals fasting and wearing sackcloth. I've had some experience with cattle and I think it would be difficult to get bulls and sheep to wear sackcloth. This episode reveals that the knowledge of the people of Nineveh is deficient, but that the impulse of their hearts is righteous. And, as the next lines of the story show, the knowledge of the people of Nineveh is accurate on two key issues. They are able to repent because they know some fundamental truths about men and about God: men can change and God can respond to that change.

“Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?” When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (3:9-10)

When I first encountered this text (and others like it) as a young Christian, I was troubled. These statements didn't fit the theology that I was being taught. What does it mean that God repented? He said he would do something, and then he did not do it. How is that possible?

To provide some context on this issue, let's look outside of the Book of Jonah to find some verses that seem to paint a somewhat different picture. Numbers 23:19 says, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” Samuel seems to be paraphrasing these words when he makes a similar statement to King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:29: “... the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent.” To make matters more difficult, the same Hebrew verb is being used in all of these quotations.⁴ And in the NT, there is the famous verse in Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”⁵

Most of this issue can be resolved by looking carefully at the language that is being used. I said last week that I do not like to disagree with the translators of these great Bible translations. But I am going to make an exception this week. The RSV, which I am quoting, is not the best translation. The NASB has “God may turn and relent”; the NIV says, “God may yet relent and with compassion turn”; the NRSV translates, “God may relent and change his mind.” I think that these are all better translations than the RSV.

During my Hebrew course with Dr. Eckman, we wrote an extended word-study paper based on a word used in Jonah 4. I chose the Hebrew verb that we are discussing here – the one that the RSV translates as “repent.” Let me share with you a bit of what I learned about this word. In about one-fourth of the OT uses of this verb in the stem in which it appears in Jonah, the subject of the verb is a human being. Three-quarters of the time, the subject is Yahweh. When a human is the subject, the most common context is the grief and then gradual comforting that a person feels after the death of someone that they deeply loved.⁶ Yahweh, on the other hand, feels grief and sorrow about a wide variety of things, and he also is described as moving past the sorrow and grief and being comforted. The transition is the relenting or changing that is being presented by this verb. The verb does

not focus on the mind and will so much as on the transition of the heart and the practical consequences that follow from this.

What a magnificent thing it is that God is like this. Of course, all human analogies, much less ones that come from the raw emotional lives of human beings, are inadequate to describe the essence and nature of our Heavenly Father. Yet this is the language that scripture gives us, and it is important that we understand it. The reason I call this ability of God magnificent is that it is through this attribute that God allows me to be reunited with him after I have sinned and distanced myself from him. This is movement from grief to comfort experienced by the father of the Prodigal Son who thought his son was dead and finds him alive and coming home. I think it is the transition we will feel when we meet loved ones in the resurrection whom we sorely miss.

If you have ever wished for a second chance; if you have ever wished to be forgiven; if you have ever felt the pain and sorrow that you have caused another person and wished with all your heart to make amends, then you will glory in a God who is comforted when people repent. For when we need a second chance, when we sin, and when we cause pain we put pain and grief in the heart of God. But what we learn from the Book of Jonah is that God does not just keep this pain locked in his heart, becoming angrier and angrier with each passing sin. To the contrary, Yahweh is comforted when he sees the sinner repent and he takes the opportunity to lavish his love on those who turn back toward him.

This is a God like no other. This is a God who restores, re-creates, rejuvenates, and resurrects. This is a God of love. And the people of Nineveh have caught a tiny glimpse of this truth and staked their future on it. But what about Jonah?

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “I pray you, LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy, and that you repent of evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beg you, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (4:1-3)

Wow! There is so much wrong in Jonah's reaction that it is hard to know where to start. Jonah is displeased and angry when his mission is successful. How strong his hatred must have been for Nineveh! How thoroughly encased in his self-righteous bigotry must he have been! No Hebrew listening to this part of the story could have been comfortable. Those who shared Jonah's hatred of Nineveh and the Assyrians have been shown their sin. Those who could rejoice in the repentance of Nineveh would be embarrassed by their prophet. The precise reasons that make Yahweh so compassionate and loving are the reasons that Jonah wants nothing to do with him. He would rather be dead. Here is our suicidal prophet once again. Only this time, there are no sailors to throw him overboard. What will he do?

Fortunately for Jonah, God loves not only the people of Nineveh. He grieves over the hardness of Jonah's heart too and decides to reach out to him through the plants and animals, once

again demonstrating his sovereign power as the God of heaven and the maker of the seas and dry land.

And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. And the LORD God appointed a plant, and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint; and he asked that he might die, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." (4:4-8)

Yahweh's question for Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry" is clearly very important. It will be repeated twice more before the story ends. Literally, the question is, "Has to do good become angry to you?" We might say, "Does doing good anger you?" Jonah does not answer the Lord with words, but instead stomps off to the east of Nineveh, builds himself a hut for protection from the sun and sits there. Remember, Jonah already knows God's judgment upon Nineveh: the grief in God's heart over the sin and misery of Nineveh has been comforted by the repentance of the people of Nineveh. Nineveh will not, at this time, be destroyed, for God has had a change of heart. His mercy and graciousness has once again prevailed. Jonah knows all of this – why else does the story say that he become so angry? So he goes off to stew in his own juices.

Pathetically, I have to admit that I am often like Jonah. Sometimes I know that I am wrong, that everyone else has moved on, and they are willing to take me back if I will but turn back and join them. But somehow, I can't. I'm too proud, too stuck, too angry, too sinful. This is what pouting and self-indulgence can lead to. What might begin as emotional excess over disappointment or disagreement can become a rigid, inflexible, self-righteous monomania, as it has become with Jonah. Sometimes I think that the best thing to do at these times is to laugh at yourself, for that is how ridiculous we can be when trapped inside of our self-imposed cages of sin. Laughter that says, "Yes, I see how absurd I am. I agree with you about this, God!" can be a very healthy thing.

It is worth noting that there are some intended parallels between Chapter 1 and this part of the story.⁷ Just as Jonah was inside the great fish, now he is inside a hut. Just as Jonah went into the ship and fell into an immobilizing sleep, now he becomes faint and feels near the point of death. In both sections, death is Jonah's desired outcome. The Hebrew translated as Jonah becoming faint could also mean that Jonah wrapped himself in something to protect himself from the heat. The image of Jonah wrapping himself up in the midst of scorching wind and blazing sun is poignant. Jonah's anger and disapproval of Yahweh's "doing good" has caused him to be emotionally and psychologically "stuck." In both cases, Jonah becomes immobile physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (4:9-11)

Again, God questions Jonah and Jonah throws God's words back at him. Jonah reiterates his desire for death rather than see the compassion of God manifested in Nineveh. God then explains his object lesson about the plant. We cannot miss the point of that lesson: our God is deeply grieved and longs to be comforted through repentance when people, when anyone, sins. He is so compassionate that his heart even aches for the cattle of Nineveh.

And so the story ends. Or does it? Hopefully, you feel the problem. The final voice of the story is the voice of God asking a question: "Should I not be compassionate?" We wait for Jonah's response and we don't get one. Let me show you in part why we feel that we are left hanging at the end of the story. Here is an outline of the structure of Jonah 4:

A. Jonah becomes angry (1)

B. Jonah's prayer to Yahweh – "My death is better than my life." (2-3)

C. Yahweh queries Jonah: "Does doing good anger you?" (4)

D. Yahweh's object lesson for Jonah of the plant and the worm (6-8a)

B¹. Jonah's prayer to his soul – "My death is better than my life." (8b)

C¹. Yahweh queries Jonah: "Does doing good anger you regarding the plant?" (9)

D¹. Yahweh's object lesson explained – His right to have pity – even on animals!

Notice that there is no corresponding component to A, Jonah's anger. The structure demands a response from Jonah, but we don't get one. I believe that this is purposeful and that the author is using this as a technique so that each and every reader will feel the weight of God's questions: "Does doing good anger you? Should I not have compassion?"

I said last week that the fundamental question of the Book of Jonah is this: Will Jonah accept and follow the way of his God or is the life of mercy and compassion too hard? Will you, the reader, accept Yahweh and his merciful compassion, or will you turn away?

I would like to conclude this message with some thoughts about an issue that has been like background music throughout the story. This is the question of the freedom of man in the light

of the character of Yahweh our God. The Book of Jonah, especially as I have expounded it, seems to fall very clearly on the side of emphasizing the freedom of man. Jonah can choose not to go to Nineveh; the pagan sailors can act to avert drowning in the storm sent by God; the people of Nineveh can repent to avert the doom prophesied by Jonah. Beyond the human, even God is presented as someone who longs to change his mind about the fall of Nineveh, delighting instead to send blessing *based on the repentance of the individuals involved*. It seems like the Book of Jonah is all about the importance of our actions, and the huge consequences they can have.

It is important to notice here, however, that the “action” that triggers the responsiveness of God is one thing: repentance. In fact, God’s sovereign control of his creation is emphasized throughout the text. We’ve seen this in every chapter, multiple times. God wants a message sent to Nineveh. One way or another, it is going to get there. God doesn’t want Jonah to die, and so the great fish acts as the servant of God’s will. God wants to teach Jonah a lesson, so a plant and a worm are appointed to become actors in the divine object lesson.

God is compassionate and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in loyal love. God’s heart is also filled with grief when people sin and are in misery. He is comforted when they repent. Thus the “changeability” of God is essential to his eternal and unchangeable character. God is who he is. Isn’t that in part what Yahweh told Moses at the burning bush? God has sovereign power.

All of these things are beyond the control of Jonah or any other man. Yet Jonah can choose. And we have seen that the story of Jonah is all about asking the reader whether or not he or she will choose to pursue the godly path of mercy and compassion. You simply must ask yourself this question at the end of Jonah.

Last week, someone approached me at the end of the service and said that the story of Jonah had encouraged them to see some neighbors in a new way. For many years, this person had been longing for the doom of God to fall upon these neighbors. The story of Jonah helped this person see that this is not the way of our God. This attitude of heart was the heart of Jonah, not the heart of Jonah’s God. I don’t know what happened when this person went home, but I do know that this was a right understanding of the Book of Jonah. This is the call of the book to our hearts. What pattern of hatred, what habit of self-righteousness, what hardness of heart toward neighbor or colleague is immobilizing you? Will you see the misery of your fellow pilgrims in this life with the compassionate, merciful, grieving heart of God, or will you choose to remain stuck in the prison of hatred, self-absorption, and sin? A merciful God awaits your response.

¹ Biblical narrative is extremely sparse. Part of the power of its technique is that the reader must take every word seriously and feel the connotations and implications – i.e. the unstated elements of the account. This characteristic is brilliantly analyzed by Eric Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, especially the opening chapter “Odysseus’ Scar.” Robert Alter expands on Auerbach’s groundbreaking essay in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

² I.e. in Jonah 3:4b.

³ The law is unnecessary because the people have already repented!

⁴ To be more precise, the Hebrew verbs in these examples all share the same root. There is some stem variation: In 1 Samuel 15:29 Jonah 4:2, *nhm* is in the Niphal, while in Numbers it is in the Hithpael. If anyone wants to pursue this further, I recommend the article in, Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 (Peabody, 1997), pp. 734-739.

⁵ A key to interpreting these OT verses is to carefully consider the context and condition of the speakers involved. Balaam’s comment in Numbers probably refers only to the specific event about which he is prophesying. It is extremely likely that we should hear irony or even anger in Samuel’s comments to Saul in 1 Samuel. In any event, the OT word *nhm*, which describes the change of heart in God when He turns away from His anger, is different from the theologically-laden term “repent” as used in the NT.

⁶ For example, this verb is used to describe how Isaac was eventually comforted after his grief over the death of his mother Sarah (Gen. 24:67).

⁷ Jonah 1-2 parallels Jonah 3-4 in several interesting ways. The episode of Jonah with the sailors is a mirror of Jonah and the people of Nineveh. The lesson is spelled out for the reader twice: the pagans get it right each time. Will Jonah (or you, the reader) get it right just once?

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