

“Waiting to See”

Jonah 4

This Sunday, we hear the conclusion of Jonah’s story. This is the part we skip or don’t talk about in church. We usually end the conversation with Jonah still sitting in the belly of the big fish or we stop the conversation after Jonah does what God asked him to do in the first place. But, Jonah’s story continues beyond these points. Jonah’s story continues beyond the belly of the big fish. It continues beyond the one day, walking around Nineveh, telling everyone to repent. It continues with an interesting look into God’s grace and how we as people of faith often react when that grace is shared with others without asking our permission first.

Hear now these words found in the fourth chapter of Jonah. I will be reading from the Message version, starting at verse 10 from chapter 3 to remind us how we all got to this point...

God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their evil lives. He *did* change his mind about them. What he said he would do to them he didn’t do. Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at GOD, “GOD! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That’s why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!

³ “So, GOD, if you won’t kill them, kill *me*! I’m better off dead!”

⁴ GOD said, “What do you have to be angry about?”

⁵ But Jonah just left. He went out of the city to the east and sat down in a sulk. He put together a makeshift shelter of leafy branches and sat there in the shade to see what would happen to the city.

⁶ GOD arranged for a broad-leafed tree to spring up. It grew over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk. Jonah was pleased and enjoyed the shade. Life was looking up.

⁷⁻⁸ But then God sent a worm. By dawn of the next day, the worm had bored into the shade tree and it withered away. The sun came up and God sent a hot, blistering wind from the east. The sun beat down on Jonah's head and he started to faint. He prayed to die: "I'm better off dead!"

⁹ Then God said to Jonah, "What right do you have to get angry about this shade tree?"

Jonah said, "Plenty of right. It's made me angry enough to die!"

¹⁰⁻¹¹ GOD said, "What's this? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than 120,000 childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong, to say nothing of all the innocent animals?"

The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.

Just, when we thought this story was at the end, it pulls us back in. Here, we all thought when we first began this series weeks ago, that we would just be learning about a guy who refused to do what God asked him to do, then, all of a sudden, we discover that all along, this story has been about our narrow viewpoint of God's mercy and grace. When we first heard about Jonah and his refusal to go to Nineveh, we all thought it was simply a nice story about a reluctant prophet who

got swallowed by a big fish and in no way could its message ever relate to what we are experiencing in 2021. But surprise! We get to chapter 4 and discover that this whole story about Jonah has really been about how we as people of faith get angry when God decides to share God's grace with others without asking our permission first, especially if that grace is extended to people who don't look like us, who don't think like us, who don't act like us...you know...people who we don't think are deserving of God's grace.

Now you see, why we stop at the end of Chapter 2. Or if we do go on, why we do not read the text past Chapter 3. We do not like how the story ends. Because it confronts us with our own hypocrisy. It confronts us with the complexity of God's grace. Jonah's story confronts us with the fact that God is God and we are not....and we don't like it that fact.

No slight intended but that's a lot to deal with in an hour on Sunday morning when we would just rather sing our songs, take our communion, and then leave the service, all the while staying in our bubble of comfort and privilege.

As people of faith, when we read this story, it is just easier to focus on Jonah and all his flaws rather to recognize that his story stands as a mirror towards us, confronting us with our own stuff as well. No, let's just keep characterizing Jonah as a reluctant prophet. Let's keep making him out to be the foolish one in the story

and then we can keep things just the way they are. If we do all that, then we will not have to ask ourselves how many times we have said the same the exact same thing to God as Jonan did when he was frustrated and angry, seeing God's grace put into practice.

But, here's the what we need to remember...this type of confrontation about our narrowmindedness when it comes to God's grace is not limited to just Jonah's story. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, there is story after story, calling us as people of faith to not put limits on God's grace, to not put ourselves in the place of God when it comes to judging others, reminding us to give thanks that God is God and we are not.... because as Jesus tells his disciples, "God makes the rain to fall on the just and unjust." Or as I have also heard it... Love one another and let God sort it out later.

So many times, when we hear about someone who receives God's grace, our first reaction is why them? How in the world do they deserve to receive such a gift? This very thinking has even infiltrated our society, our culture, our politics...only it is usually said this way...

Surely they made poor choices to deserve their situation. Why can't they just pull themselves up by the bootstraps, like I did? If I help out one person, then I will have to help out all the others as well. How do I know if the person receiving the help is actually deserving of the help?

The fact of the matter is when it comes to God's grace, as people of faith, we like to talk about it but become very frustrated when we see it put into practice, especially if we don't get a say in who receives that grace. And that is a bitter pill for us to swallow because no longer is Jonah simply a reluctant prophet. He represents us and all the times we refused to let God be the God we have all known and experienced in our own lives, all the times we refused to let God be the God of grace, the God of love for others, to others.

I do not pretend to have all the answers. But what I do know is this....as disciples of Christ, we are called to do the hard work of reconciliation as it relates to grace. Grace is a gift and we should treat it as such, not cheapen it by ignoring the challenges it brings us. Nor should we refuse the invitation which is offered to us when we embrace such a gift because this invitation to experience God's grace in our own lives, in our relationships with others expands our understanding of who God is. It expands our understanding of who we are called to become as the people of God.

It invites us to discover a new way to be... a way where healing and wholeness is available for all, a way where justice and mercy reign, a way where God's Kingdom is fully realized here on Earth just as it is in Heaven.

You see, what Jonah learns and what we learn as well is just when we think the story is finished, God's grace has a funny way of showing up and transforming everything. Or as someone who is way smarter than me said... [Jonah's] story ends with [a] question, with Jonah still sitting outside the city, waiting to see what will happen.

Because in the end, when it comes to God's grace, God is God and we are not. And I cannot tell you how many times I am thankful for that fact. Amen.