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Jonah 3:1-5, 10

MERCY MISGIVINGS

The Book of Jonah is a work of comedy. Perhaps we do not expect to find humor when we turn to the Bible, but this story about Jonah with all its absurd exaggerations and outrageous behaviors would have been regarded as a piece of comedy by the ancient readers of this story. The central character is a man named Jonah, who is not a terribly likeable guy. He comes off as cowardly, and complaining, and negative. And a bunch of absurd things keep happening to him. The book itself is so short you could read it in five minutes. Here are the basic highlights:

God called Jonah to undertake a distasteful task. Jonah was to go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim God's displeasure with their wickedness. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire--an empire that had conquered the Jewish people, and had become therefore a sworn enemy of the Jewish people. As you could imagine, that was the last place Jonah wanted to go. So instead of obeying God, instead of heading off for Nineveh, Jonah high tails it off in the opposite direction. He boards a ship to sail as far away from Nineveh as he could go. But a big storm strikes the boat and everyone on board is getting tossed around like rag dolls--everyone but Jonah who somehow manages to snore soundly through the violent storm. The sailors wake him up and come to the conclusion that Jonah is the cause of their peril, and they toss him into the sea. And then Jonah gets swallowed up by a great fish. This is the part of the story that many of us may recall. Jonah sits there in the belly of the fish and he sings a pious little prayer about how loyal he is to God, which of course, he clearly is not. It is then that the fish vomits Jonah out on dry land.

I can just imagine those ancient people of faith sitting around telling this story to one another and laughing over its absurdity. Lying there on the beach, covered in fish vomit, God calls Jonah again. "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." This time Jonah listens. Still smelling of the inside of a fish, Jonah marches off to Nineveh. It is a gigantic city. The story tells us that it would take 3 days to walk across. And Jonah preaches to the Ninevites, crying out that "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" In Hebrew, this sentence is actually just five words. Jonah delivers a five word sermon! And here's the thing you just have to love about this story: the people of Nineveh repent. In a mass conversion, the likes of which would make Billy Graham jealous, the entire population of this gigantic city repents of their wayward lives and they turn toward God. Everyone, including the animals, puts on sackcloth as a sign of repentance. This story, with its grumpy prophet, its giant fish, its colossal conversion, and its remorseful farm animals is proof of the comedic side of the Bible. And in the face of this mass conversion, God changes God's mind, and decides to show mercy to the folks of Nineveh. Instead of destruction and the fires of judgment, they are given a second chance.

Here is where the comedy takes a little bit of a step back and the serious message of the story emerges. And what emerges in this ridiculous story is the message of mercy, specifically God's mercy--God's mercy even toward people we can't stand, even toward people who deserve punishment, even toward our enemies. Jonah gets furious with God for the mercy God shows to the people of Nineveh. He prays to God and in his prayer he yells at God--evidence that prayer with God does not always have to be a serene, quiet endeavor. Jonah yells at God, "I knew you were going to do that! I knew you were a God of mercy and full of steadfast love. And that is why I didn't want to take on your stupid mission in the first place!" Ok, he didn't say those exact

words, but what he said comes pretty close to that. Jonah is furious over God's mercy toward a people he believed deserved destruction and suffering.

This story causes us to confront this troubling issue of God's mercy. Because we, like Jonah, are sure that some people do not deserve God's mercy or God's love. No doubt we can all think of the folks we think don't deserve mercy or love. Maybe they are within our own families, an ex-spouse, a hostile in-law. Maybe they are colleagues or neighbors--people who have caused us a great deal of pain and injury. Maybe they are enemies of our nation as the Assyrians were for Jonah. Maybe they are members of an opposing political party whose policies we detest. Maybe they are people who have committed some kind of terrible deed. And we are sure they lie beyond God's mercy.

I was talking with Tim last night about my sermon today and how the scripture passage deals with this human inclination of ours to desire bad things to happen to our enemies, and he asked, "Oh, so are you going to mention the New England Patriots?"

There is within us this inclination to see bad things happen to our enemies. And yet, then we are confronted with today's biblical story or the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. We are confronted with God's mercy toward the undeserving. And it offends us. The trouble Jonah had with God is quite frankly the trouble we often have with God: that God loves too many people.

The Jonah story needles us to ask some difficult questions, like: "who is God allowed to love?" and "Are there people we won't permit God to love?" It's easier when we decide that some people lie beyond God's love because then we don't have to care about them either. We can shut down our hearts to people we don't like. We can close our borders to people we declare come from "inferior" countries, because we believe they are somehow less than us, worse than

us. We can separate ourselves from people who have offended us, telling ourselves that God is against them too.

Who are those people we wish to see suffer? Who do we feel should lie beyond God's mercy and love? Such questions are not about excusing bad or harmful behavior. We don't excuse injustice or wrong doing. But no person is every God forsaken.

We have a terrible love of hatred. It is something we nurture and cultivate, both as individuals as well as a society. We allow grievances to take up permanent residence within our hearts. We readily embrace stereotypes of our enemies and refuse to relinquish the idea that they can be anything but what we have declared them to be. Like Jonah, we relish the idea of the sufferings of those who have offended us. And our hearts become places that refuse to offer grace. In truth, we have grave misgivings about this whole idea of mercy. And yet mercy is a foundational principle of the Christian faith.

Jonah doesn't like this idea of the Ninevites getting a second chance but the ironic thing is that he fails to see that *he's* been given a second chance. In fact, throughout this story Jonah is give multiple chances. He runs away from God, gets swallowed by a fish, and then God tracks him down and calls him *second* time with the mission to go to Nineveh. His third chance comes after the Ninevites repent and Jonah yells at God in anger and then he storms off to pout. Jonah finds a little bush to sit under for shade and there he stew in his anger. But guess what? God comes again to Jonah with an effort to open his heart. You see, this story it isn't just about trying to call the people of Nineveh to repent. This story is also about trying to change Jonah's heart, about seeking his repentance. God wanted to give Jonah the chance to have his heart enlarged. And so God keeps on coming to Jonah, keeps on calling to Jonah, keeps on seeking him out-- with second and third and multiple chances.

In Mark's gospel, we hear about how Jesus began his ministry with a sermon that sounds a bit like Jonah's. Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news." Jesus' sermon is a call to repentance. Now, when we hear the word "repentance" we often think it is a call for us to turn from our lives of crime, from our hedonistic habits, from our corrupt and immoral behaviors-- and if we're not doing any of those things, well then we don't see how we might need to repent. But repentance simply means turning toward God. It involves turning from the attitudes and habits and priorities and pathways we have constructed for ourselves and turning instead to following after the way of Jesus.

And so the repentance Jesus calls us to embrace means following after Jesus' way of forgiveness. It means following after Jesus' way of compassion. It means following his generosity and his self-giving and his service and his concern for justice. Repentance is a matter of our hearts as much as it is about our behaviors. And it is a daily, even hourly endeavor. Repentance is a call to second chances, and third chances, and fourth chances to following Jesus.

Jonah had a hard time getting this idea. He was mad at God for the mercy God showed to others but he didn't quite see that God was trying to reach him, to change his heart, to open it up to mercy and compassion.

The startling aspect to the mercy God extends to all of us, every one of us, is that for God, mercy precedes repentance. Usually, when someone has wronged us, we expect them to first be sorry, to be repentant, and then we will decide if we will show them mercy and offer forgiveness. But with God, mercy comes first. The Apostle Paul reminds us that "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) Even before

we repent, God reaches out to us with love. God reaches out to us with love while we are still sinners because that love can be a catalyst for us to turn our lives around.

The comedy returns to the story of Jonah as he sits there fuming in anger under his little bush. A worm comes inching along and it burrows into that bush Jonah is sitting under and it kills it. Now Jonah no longer has any shade and is left sitting under the scorching sun. As you might imagine, this does nothing to improve Jonah's disposition. Jonah rails some more at God, about how could God could kill this little bush, and so on. And God says to Jonah, "You're concerned about this bush. But shouldn't I be concerned about the people of Nineveh? Don't they deserve at least as much compassion as you would offer this bush? Shouldn't the folks of Nineveh, those lost and wayward people, lost in their own excesses, lost in their own misguided priorities, lost in their empty lives and values, don't these people who can't even tell their right from their left, don't they deserve some measure of mercy?"

And so this comedy comes to an end on a serious note with a serious question. We never get to hear Jonah's answer to this question. That's where our story ends. We never know if Jonah repented of his anger and bitterness and allowed God's love to revive his hardened heart, if he let go of his grudges and resentments and let God's mercy take hold of him. We are left wondering how Jonah will answer God's question about mercy. And, indeed, how will we?