

“Pouting Under a Plant”

Reading: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

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The story of Jonah and the Fish is one of the most famous stories from the Bible, and it's certainly one of the most unique. But the story of Jonah is not really focused on the fish. There's an awful lot that happens in the story after the fish leaves the scene. Jonah is a prophet sent by God to proclaim a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, which was populated by the notoriously cruel and pagan Assyrians. Jonah refuses and runs the opposite direction, but the ship he's traveling in gets caught in a storm, and the sailors on the ship throw Jonah overboard once they learn that his rebellion is the cause of their danger. Jonah is, of course, swallowed by a giant fish and taken back to land. Having learned his lesson, sort of, Jonah goes to Nineveh and barely preaches the message God gives him — it's a *very* short sermon — and the entire city, from the king on down to the livestock, repents in spite of Jonah. And that brings us to the passage we read for today.

But the story isn't about the giant fish, and the story isn't really even about the tens of thousands of Ninevites who repented and avoided the terrible judgment God was prepared to bring upon them. The story is really about Jonah, and it's about the people he represents. Jonah's sermon preached in Nineveh brought conviction to the Assyrians, but the real intent of the story is to bring conviction on a very different sort of person. Oftentimes a book of a prophet, like the book of Isaiah or the book of Ezekiel, is a sermon or a collection of sermons proclaiming the spiritual state of a nation during that prophet's life, and then calling that nation to change and renew their relationship with God. Jonah's book is different. It's a story of an episode in one man's life that almost serves as a parable, calling God's people to consider how close they are to Jonah in the story. The story isn't about the fish, and it's not about the Ninevites — it's about Jonah, and it's about you and me, and how likely we are to find ourselves pouting under that plant like Jonah.

You see, at the core of this story is Jonah's prejudice against the Ninevites. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and at that time in history they were one of the dominant powers in the region. And they didn't get their power through democracy and treaties and treating people well — the Assyrians were brutal warriors, renowned for their speed and their cruelty. They would routinely commit atrocities that would shock the world today, and then their kings would brag about it on their monuments. What's more, they were going through a period of expansion, and they were right next to Jonah's country. They were a serious threat, and in fact they invaded and destroyed large parts of Jonah's homeland right around this time. The Ninevites are the unredeemable enemy.

But it had to do with more than just the character of the Assyrians, it also had to do with the grace of God. As the story opens and Jonah receives a word from God, He knows about the character of God as much as he knows about the character of the Ninevites. God is giving them a message of repentance, and if they hear that message and repent, then God might forgive them. But they certainly don't deserve that, Jonah thinks. It's just not fair. Jonah knows what God's like; He's "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." Jonah's people knew all about God because they had a covenant relationship with Him, and they had been saved and guided by Him for generations. They were nothing like the Assyrians; they were God's people. They weren't perfect, but they were nowhere near as bad as the Assyrians. It's just not right for God to show the same grace to two nations that are so different.

The point of the story is Jonah and how he reacts to God's word of grace and compassion. You see, lots of God's people could sit in Jonah's place in the shade of that plant. Jonah was letting the circumstances of the Ninevites determine for him whether he thought God could save them. Jonah was letting their situation, their past, their character, their culture dictate to him whether he thought they were worthy of grace. His intent was to remove himself from participating in anything resembling salvation for his enemies: let's let God do whatever He wants to do, but I want nothing to do with giving the Ninevites a chance. He was looking at these peoples' circumstances rather than keeping his eyes on what God was doing.

And then there's this almost humorous object lesson with the plant. God causes a plant to grow and give shade to Jonah while he waits outside of Nineveh, hoping to see the show when God brings destruction on the city. He's happy to have the shade, but then God causes a worm to eat the plant, which makes it wither away. Jonah throws a tantrum of sorts, and when God asks him whether it's right for him to be so upset, I love his response: "It is [right]," he says, "and I'm so angry I wish I were dead." Not only is he taking his eyes off of God's salvation for a lost nation and focusing instead on the sins of that nation, he's also focusing his attention on his own circumstances. He's placing a higher priority on his own comfort and satisfaction than on the salvation of these people.

Jonah is surrounded by miraculous examples of salvation, but he ends up pouting under a plant because he keeps taking his eyes off of what God is doing and focusing instead on his own priorities. In the first chapter of his story, while he's fleeing from God's call in a ship bound for the far reaches of the world, it's fairly clear from the story that Jonah's shipmates are not Israelites. They don't seem to have any sort of relationship with the true God; presumably they followed some polytheistic and idolatrous religion of their homeland. But when they're in danger of being overcome by the storm and Jonah explains to them that this situation is his own fault, and when they throw him overboard at his request and watch as the sea becomes calm, we learn that "the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to Him." These pagan sailors are getting saved in spite of Jonah's efforts.

And likewise, when Jonah finally gives in and goes to Nineveh and preaches God's call to repentance, he preaches just about the shortest sermon he possibly could have: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown!" And almost instantly, the entire city repents, and God withholds destruction. A hundred and twenty thousand people are saved based on Jonah's one-sentence sermon. Jonah is surrounded by miraculous movements of God; God is breaking out all around him, but he sits pouting under a plant. And it makes me wonder: what amazing acts of salvation is God in the middle of in our community? What souls are on the brink of being saved, and what lives are on the cusp of total transformation, and what families are on the verge of being healed — and are we looking for them, or are we pouting under our plant? Are there people we're secretly looking down our noses at, just hoping God brings the consequences of their actions to bear on them? Or are we focused more on our own comfort than we are on the salvation of thousands?

Jesus was fully aware of this Jonah-like reaction among God's people. He was dealing with it during His ministry, as He reached out to very lost people and then had to put up with religious folks getting upset at the grace of God. He told a parable about these sorts of people. They're the ones who started working in the field first thing in the morning; they've been in the kingdom for a while.

And so when these other folks come along, hours later, and then hours after that, and then some even sneak in by the skin of their teeth, and everyone receives the same grace of God regardless of when they started in the field. That seems unfair to the people who had their act together and came to work on time. But the unfairness lies not in the pay, since everyone received what was promised to them. The unfairness lies in the words of those early-morning workers: “you have made them equal to us.” Give them grace, God, but just not quite as much grace as those who deserve a little more. Their circumstances dictate a little less grace for them, and my pride dictates a little more grace for me.

But that’s not how God’s kingdom works. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. God is able to save abundantly, and it has nothing to do with what anyone deserves. It’s easy for us to forget today, two thousand years after the founding of the church, that the vast majority of the church is made up of “the last.” Jesus was a Jew and He preached to Jews, and they were God’s chosen people, “the first.” The prospect of including Gentiles, non-Jews, among the people of God as equal heirs of God’s promises would have been very challenging to most of Jesus’ audience, to say the least. And yet God has grafted us in.

He’s grafted in lots of those who should have been “the last.” He’s offered grace and salvation to lots of Ninevites. There was a man named Saul, who was involved in numerous conspiracies to falsely accuse Christians, and in some cases he had them killed. But Jesus Christ saved him, and he became the Apostle Paul, and was crucial in forming the church. There was a man named Francis, who grew up in a rich and indulgent setting and lived a rather frivolous life. But then Jesus Christ called him, and we know him as Francis of Assisi. There was a man named John, who captained slave ships in the eighteenth century, sending countless people into miserable death or miserable slavery. But then Jesus Christ met him, and he became a priest and an abolitionist, and he influenced William Wilberforce, who worked to end the English slave trade, and John Newton wrote the words to “Amazing Grace.” The last will be first. There are people in our community who are the last, and God is inviting them to step up in the line.

Maybe there are some of us here who don’t worry so much about how other peoples’ circumstances take them far from God, we worry more about how our own circumstances are taking *us* far from God. We’re not under the plant with Jonah, we’re in Nineveh. Or we’re not in the field working at the break of dawn, we’re loafing around in the city square thinking that the landowner would never want to hire someone as late as me. Maybe some of us here are the last, not the first. But like Jonah, we’re taking our eyes off of what God is doing and focusing instead on our circumstances. We’re forgetting just how big the grace of God is, and just how miraculous His miracles can be. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

We are not literally pouting under a plant today, but you may find yourself in a similar situation, spiritually speaking. We are surrounded by people whose circumstances are so messy that the world — and even sometimes the church — has written them off as being unredeemable. They’re too messy, or being saved is too difficult, or they’re not worth the effort. Sometimes we even look at our own lives, and the ways that God has been at work to save us, and the work we’ve done in response and the changes we’ve made, and we might even sit under that plant with Jonah and pout about God’s love for scoundrels like that. Wherever we are, we need to be deliberate about not letting ourselves linger under the plant, and instead praying for those who are far from God. We

might even climb out from under the plant and go to them, loving them and inviting them into the beloved community.

Or maybe you're in a different place today. You're nowhere near Jonah's plant; you're in Nineveh, struggling under burdens so big that they make you wonder whether God can save you from them. There is good news: God is "gracious and compassionate...slow to anger and abounding in love." Let us pray for you in your time of need, inviting God to do a work of His amazing salvation.

Benediction: Go and proclaim with your words and your life that our God is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.



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