

Holy Mackerel! Part 3

When we left off last week, Jonah had just been vomited up onto the beach. Beginning at the third chapter, we read: *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:*² *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."*³ *Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city-- a visit required three days.* Does this strike you as a little odd? God doesn't punish Jonah for his disobedience. God doesn't jump all over him about how much trouble he's been. At the very least, I'd kind of expect God to say something like, "Okay, Jonah, do I have your attention now? I'm going to give you a second chance, a chance to redeem yourself, but you'd better get it right this time!" But it seems like God just starts fresh with Jonah, just starts all over again as if nothing had happened. "Go to Nineveh and give them my message," God says. Now, it's no surprise that Jonah is a lot more compliant this time. After three days inside the fish, he's probably ready to do anything God wants! And off he goes to the huge city of his hated and feared enemies. This is the city that the prophet Nahum calls a "city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims" and a city of "endless cruelty." (Nahum 3:1 & 19) Nasty place, this Nineveh! It's a huge city. Some translations say it took three days to visit it; other translations say it took three days to walk across the city. No matter what, it was big!

⁴ *On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."* Well, that's not much of a sermon. Eight words. Five words in Hebrew. Not much, any way you look at it. There's no explanation, no reasoning that says because of this and that action, you'll be punished. There is no call to repentance, no offer of hope, but just a simple declaration of, "You're going to be overthrown." That word *overthrown*? That's the same word that was spoken about Sodom and Gomorrah.¹ Overthrown. It's going to rain fire and brimstone, that's what it implies! "You're going to get what's coming to you. You're going to get what you deserve!" Of course, if we heard someone standing on the street corner making this kind of declaration, we'd just think it was the "ravings of a religious fanatic."²

⁵ *The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth..*⁶ *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.*⁷ *Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink."*⁸ *But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.*⁹ *Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."* One of the jokes in seminary is, "Who was the greatest preacher who ever lived? Jonah. Because he preached an eight word sermon, the shortest sermon on record, and a whole city repented, including the animals!"

Well, it's entirely possible that what we have here is an abbreviated account. This may be the Reader's Digest condensed version - the story with only the highlights and the important points, but not all of the details. In any event, the Ninevites take the message to heart and they put on sackcloth and begin fasting. Even the king gets down off his throne, gives up his royal robes, puts on sackcloth, and sits in the dust. He declares a fast for all the people and for all of the animals. The whole city is in a posture of mourning. By mourning their sins, they're offering a visible sign of repentance. But notice that the king has the same attitude as the captain of the ship. The captain on the ship had said, "Maybe your God will save us. Maybe. The king doesn't make any assumption about being able to manipulate God. The king says, "Maybe." The king says, "Who knows? Perhaps God will relent."

¹⁰ *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.* God relented. God repented. God made a u-turn from the direction that had been promised.

^{NIV} **Jonah 4:1** *But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.*² *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*

¹ Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, p 150

² Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, p 151

*are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*³ Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." Jonah is all upset. I've told them they were going to be punished and now you're about to make a liar of me. This isn't fair. What sort of prophetic power do I have if you're going to undo my prophecy? Jonah's sense of his own worth is fueled by his hatred of his enemy. His success is dependent on Nineveh's destruction. Just go ahead and kill me, Lord, 'cause I'd rather be dead than see you gracious toward these blankety-blank Ninevites! Frankly, God's compassion is scandalous and Jonah is a failure as far as he can see, and he's covered in embarrassment and shame.³ Jonah doesn't like God. God is kind and loving and it makes Jonah mad. Jonah wants vengeance. Jonah wants punishment for his enemies. He wants God to rain fire down on the people that have been persecuting and threatening his nation. Jonah was afraid this was going to happen. He says, I know how you are, God. You're wishy-washy! You're too quick to forgive and too slow to punish! It's great that you didn't punish me when I disobeyed you. I'm part of your chosen people. We've got a deal. We have a covenant together. We're buds, you and Israel. We're the inside guys. But these blankety-blank Ninevites are the enemies of your people. How dare you let them live?

⁴ *But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"*⁵ *Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. God says, "Think this over, Jonah. Do you have any right to be angry? Who is in charge here? Me or you? And Jonah does his Jonah thing - he stomps off! He leaves the city and goes out and sits down. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.*⁶ *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.*⁷ *But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.*⁸ *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."*⁹ *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."*¹⁰ *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.*¹¹ *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?"* Jonah has finally shown that he can have tender feelings for something other than himself. Sort of, anyway. He really liked the vine. And God says, if you can care about a plant that you didn't plant or tend, then can't you see how I care about the people of Nineveh? Note, too, that God expresses not only concern for the people of Nineveh, but that "the animals of Nineveh matter alongside the people."⁴

What can we learn from this little book that is only two or three pages long? Well, Jonah is certainly about the mercy and love of God. The poet Robert Frost said, "After Jonah, you could never trust God not to be merciful again." It shouldn't come as too big of a surprise. The Psalmist says, God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities." The good news is that we can depend on God for mercy. The bad news is that God cares about other people besides us. As much as we might want to trust God to smite our enemies and rain destruction down on those who threaten us, God just might be merciful.

We have a problem with that. We don't want a God who shows great mercy in the face of overwhelming wickedness.⁵ But this story warns us against cause and effect thinking when it comes to God. The evil of the Ninevites did not bring punishment and the innocence of the sailors did not prevent danger. And the captain and the king declare that neither prayer nor repentance is a certain guarantee. As one scholar put it so clearly, "Human action does not dictate divine response."⁶ Jesus said that God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." The story of Jonah has a lot in common with a parable that Jesus told - the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Ninevites are like that ungrateful and misbehaving son. God is like the forgiving father in the parable. And Jonah is like the older

³ Brown, *Obadiah through Malachi*, p 27

⁴ Phyllis Trible, *New Interpreter's Bible*, p 483

⁵ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Lectionary Commentary: First Readings*, p 486

⁶ Trible, p 516

brother who has his nose out of joint because the younger son doesn't deserve the loving welcome that the father gives.⁷

Twice God tells Jonah to go do something. Twice Jonah walks away from God. Yet, God never yells at Jonah. God never points a condemning finger at Jonah. God just keeps teaching Jonah, keeps correcting him. "This is indeed a 'God slow to anger.'"⁸

Jonah is mad because God will not do what Jonah thinks should be done. As an insider, as an Israelite, as a prophet, Jonah seems to think that he should instruct God on what needs to take place. But the outsiders, the heathens, are more humble before God. The captain of the ship and the king of Nineveh each say "Maybe," "Perhaps the Lord will relent." And we should not be too surprised that God does whatever God chooses to do. Way back on Mount Sinai God told Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (Exodus 33:19)

This little book tells us a lot about God. God does repent, repent in the real meaning of the word, which is to turn, to change direction. Moses begged God to not destroy the people camped at the foot of Mount Sinai and God had a change of heart. We should be thrilled about this! "God's capacity to change . . . is a testimony of divine grace."⁹

In fact, Jonah does know all of this. He describes and proclaims the very essence of God. Jonah says, "*I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*" There it is. These words are repeated over and over again. It is God's self description on Mount Sinai. It is repeatedly stated in the Psalms. Over and over, the Israelites become disloyal to God, and over and over, God forgives them and rescues them and accepts them back. In word and deed, this may well be the central theme of the Old Testament.

This little book also tells us a lot about ourselves. We find it easy to be like Jonah. We tend to ignore what God would have us do, especially if it's inconvenient, or if it doesn't fit in with the way we think the world should work. Like Jonah, we don't think we deserve God's wrath. We're God's people. We're Christians, believers, members of the church. And when we do admit that we aren't perfect, we're ready for God to be merciful with us, after all, we're members of the family, we're children of God. But the Lord of all creation forgives and saves the most unlikely sort of people - Ninevites, a thief on a cross, Peter who denied even knowing Jesus, the enthusiastically persecuting Saul, and even you and me. Amazing grace indeed! Love so amazing, so divine, demands our soul, our life, our all.¹⁰

Amen!

^{NIV} **Nahum 3:1** Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!

^{NIV} **Nahum 3:19** Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?

^{NIV} **Matthew 5:43** "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

^{NIV} **Exodus 32:9** "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people."¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great

⁷ Tribble, p 525

⁸ Achtemeir, p 487

⁹ Brown, *Obadiah through Malachi*, p 26

¹⁰ Achtemeir, p 487

nation."¹¹ But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people."¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'"¹⁴ Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

^{NIV} **Exodus 33:19** And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

^{NIV} **Exodus 34:6** And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

^{NIV} **Psalms 103:8** The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.¹³ As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.