

(Jonah 3:10-4:11 NRSV)

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

4 ¹ But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. ⁶ The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about 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 many animals?"

Grace for the Goose

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Jonah 3:10-4:11

Growing up, my daughter Emma's main complaint was that life just wasn't fair. Emma had a very highly developed sense of fairness. She stomped and sulked and screeched when things didn't turn out exactly the way she thought they should. I think I didn't help the situation much. I used to laugh at her expectations that life would behave itself. And, of course, I became an object lesson. I was just another example. Good fathers didn't laugh at their angry daughters.

In the end, Emma and I knew, though that the laughter was far more affection than anything else. Like a good father, I was charmed by my daughter's idealism, and a little amused at her unshakeable resolve. And so I chuckled at this little spitfire who was blood of my blood.

Rarely have I met since anyone with a greater sense of fairness than my daughter Emma had as a child. But today we have met more than her match. Jonah. Jonah would rather die than see unfairness.

God heard that Nineveh was wicked. And so God told Jonah, "Go to Nineveh and cry out against it." We all know that Jonah preferred to try to escape to Tarshish on a boat rather than go to Nineveh. We all know that God caused a storm to come, and they threw Jonah overboard. We all know that Jonah ended up in the belly of a fish and was eventually spewed up on land. But the reason all this happened, the reason that Jonah preferred to risk death rather than go to Nineveh and preach against it is odd, odd indeed.

Nineveh was the greatest city in the Assyrian Empire. And Assyria was the greatest enemy of all of Israel and Judah. Nineveh was the seat of the hated adversary. Assyria and Nineveh were the axis of evil. They were scum of the earth.

You would think that Jonah would have gladly gone and proclaimed their destruction. After all, God's prophets had proclaimed destruction to Israel itself when her ways had been bad. And according to Israel's understanding, God had punished her wickedness. One would have imagined that Jonah would have gladly gone to Nineveh to preach its destruction – except for one small thing. Jonah had a suspicion that Nineveh would listen. Jonah had an inkling that if he went to Nineveh and preached against its wickedness, the great axis of evil would actually repent, and God would let them off the hook. And according to Jonah's sense of fairness, Nineveh should never be let off the hook. So he ran the other way. He risked death rather than take God's message to Nineveh.

Well, as we all know, God doesn't like taking no for an answer. So God interrupts Jonah's escape with a storm and a fish. When the soggy prophet is spit back onto land, God says again, "Now Jonah, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." This time Jonah relents and goes to go to proclaim God's word to the hated city.

And what happens? What happens is just what Jonah thought would happen. The king

and the people of Nineveh take the message fully to heart. The people, even the animals of the city, fast. They cover themselves in sackcloth and ashes and repent of their evil ways. They cry out to God on the slim hope that their efforts will cool God's anger. "Maybe God will relent. Maybe God will let go of his anger. Maybe God will change his mind. Maybe we will not perish." And sure enough, that's exactly what happens. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."

Emma, I mean Jonah, screamed at God, "This isn't fair! This is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place. I knew you would let them off easy. "O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." Jonah cannot even abide to live in such an unfair world.

Well God did not take Jonah's life. And Jonah went outside the city. Jonah set up a shelter for himself. And he sat in it and sulked and waited to see what would become of the city.

Now it was burning hot in the desert outside the city of Nineveh. And God in a spirit of mercy appointed a bush to grow up over Jonah's head and provide him some shade and save him from discomfort. We read that Jonah was very happy about the bush. So Jonah sat there in the shade, pleased at least with his own situation, and waited to the fate of Nineveh, to see if the people would backslide and God would punish them, or maybe God would reconsider his unfair decision in the first place and wipe out the seat of evil.

Morning came. Morning came, and God appointed a worm to attack the shade bush and kill it. The bush withered. The sun rose. The sun beat down on Jonah's head. Jonah was uncomfortable and faint. And once again Jonah says he would rather die than live in such an unfair world.

So God says, "So Jonah, you are angry with the bush?" And Jonah says, "Oh yes, angry enough to die." And then God says to Jonah, "Look and see Jonah. I gave you the bush. You did not plant it. You did not nurture it. It was nothing you deserved. Yet you claim that it is unfair when the bush is taken from you. Do you think that all the good things that happen to you are things you deserve?"

God asks Jonah a good question. If Jonah thinks about it, a light bulb should go on. In the beginning of the story Jonah flees God's charge to go to Nineveh and preach condemnation to the city. Jonah directly disobeys God's command. Jonah found a ship headed to Tarshish, exactly the opposite direction from which he was supposed to go. Jonah took passage on the ship headed to Tarshish. And what happens. A big storm blows up. It threatens to swamp the ship. Everyone tries to figure out why this huge storm has come all of a sudden; they try to find out who has brought it on. The sailors cast lots, and they saw that Jonah was the problem. But even when the sailors learned that it was Jonah who was endangering their lives, what did they do? Did they throw him overboard? Did they kill him? No, they tried with all their strength to row to safety. Even when they knew that Jonah was at fault, they tried as hard as possible to do no harm to Jonah. When Jonah considers God's question: "Jonah do you deserve all the good things that happen to you?" Jonah would have to admit that the sailors treated him better than he deserved.

And when Jonah was finally thrown overboard to his certain death, what happened next? That's right, the big fish swallowed him. I don't suppose the belly of a fish is a very pleasant place. But in this case, the belly of the fish saved Jonah from sure death in the stormy sea. And

once again, Jonah was treated far better than he deserved.

And then Jonah, in the belly of the fish, prayed for his deliverance. Jonah made all those promises a desperate man makes. “But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord! Just save me, O God, and I am yours forever.” God heard Jonah’s prayer and commanded the fish to spit him safely onto the land. Jonah may have prayed fervently, but that would be a long way from saying that he deserved to be rescued. But once again, Jonah is recipient of what? That’s right, Jonah is the recipient of mercy, of God’s grace, of undeserved goodness.

Jonah has howled about fairness and justice. But it turns out that Jonah is like my eight year old daughter was. For Jonah and Emma when she was a little girl, it was fair if they got what they wanted. And it was unfair if they didn’t get what they wanted. And it was unfair if someone else got something they didn’t want them to get. The language was language of fairness and justice. But what was really going on was unbridled conceit, vanity, self-centeredness, self-concern, self-interest; what was going on was an unbridled interest in and an unbridled admiration of themselves.

And that’s alright, that’s alright in a little girl who will outgrow it, but it is frightening and distressing in an adult. At the end of the story, Jonah proves himself to be the most self-centered and thereby the most self-deluded person in the story. He is angry that God has shown mercy on Nineveh, and cannot grasp the undeserved mercy he has been shown. He is angry because the bush that God caused to grow and give him shade has withered. He is angry to be in the hot sun, and has every sense that having the shade bush is his right. And then Jonah attempts a little compassion. He says he is concerned for the poor bush that has withered at the hand of the worm. And God is incredulous. God says, “Jonah, you are concerned about the bush, but you aren’t worried at all about 120,000 people and all their animals in Nineveh? In the end, as far as Jonah can see is to the end of his own nose. For Jonah the world revolves around him. It’s all about Jonah.

Oh, what a story the story of Jonah is for us. It’s a warning to anyone who will hear. It is a warning not to clothe unbridled self-interest in an holier than thou rhetoric of fairness, justice and morality. It is a warning, as Paul says, to give up childish ways and become adults in the world.

Back in 1958 Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer published a book that took the country by storm. It was a runaway bestseller, ultimately selling several million copies. Forty-four years ago Burdick and Lederer published their book called, *The Ugly American*. *The Ugly American* was a shocking and disturbing portrait of how Americans acted in the world. The book drew a picture of Americans who rarely understood, or cared to understand even the people they presumed to help. In one vignette the U.S. ambassador to a small southeast Asian country views the people of the country as monkeys. And in the stories it is always the U.S. who knows what the country needs. The U.S. chooses to do the things that it believes will give them the best reputation. But because of its utter lack of understanding of the people, the U.S. comes off as arrogant, disrespectful and in the end pretty stupid. The ugly Americans were oh so much like Jonah – oblivious, self-involved and peddling a form of justness which really meant, It’s just about me.

Many believe that the arrogance, disrespect and lack of understanding portrayed in the

book were what led us astray over the next decade in Viet Nam. Many of the political, moral, military and foreign policy mistakes of judgement, they argue, were the direct result of a Jonah-like conceit, the sense that everything and everywhere and everybody were really about us, a point of view that gave us very little understanding of the country or the people we sought to free.

Today our nation is at war against terrorism and is even poised to enter another country claiming the moral high ground. It is a complicated and vitally important time. It would be naive to presume that world peace will be attained or that legitimate self-protection can be served by ignoring the dangers there are in our world.

But how we approach those dangers may make all the difference. How we approach them may make all the difference about whether we succeed, and it may make all the difference about whether we really do occupy the moral high ground.

The story of Jonah helps us inquire of ourselves some very helpful questions. Do we really know those we oppose? Are they people, or monkeys to us? Can we in our mind imagine the love an Iraqi citizen has for the city of Bagdad or its affection for the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers? Can we imagine that love to be the same love that we have for our own hometown, or the love we have for the fall colors of New England? Do we recognize that the quality of life that most of us enjoy is in large measure the good fortune, the good luck of our birth, or do we think it is something we deserve because God especially favors us? Do we believe that good fortune ought be extended throughout God's creation? Or do we believe that we deserve special treatment? Do we think that the tree should provide us shade to recline in but that modern day Ninevehs ought be turned into rubble? Do we believe that we and our allies are totally good, blameless and moral, and that those we oppose are totally evil, at fault, and unprincipled?

My mother used to say to me, "What's good for the goose is good for the gander." She used to say this to me when I thought I ought to have it different and better than everyone else. God was saying essentially the same thing to Jonah. God was incredulous that Jonah could rage that the shade tree was taken from him on the one hand, while on the other hand he sat under it and desired the utter destruction of 120,000 people. God wanted Jonah to understand that if grace was good for the goose, it was good for the gander, too. God gave Jonah a pretty good lesson in the right foundations for a foreign policy. It is a foundation to which we may aspire, if we truly wish to occupy the high ground. For God asks, "Should I not be concerned for Nineveh? Should I not be concerned for all my creation and all my creatures?? Amen.

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