

Prophetic Living: Quarrelling With God

Jonah 4:1-11

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In foxholes, it is said, there are no atheists.

Indeed, during times of trouble people tend to look to a power greater than themselves for protection and hope. So it was that during World War II the churches of Europe and North America were full. And in the days immediately following 9/11 people who otherwise never darkened the door, showed up in churches around America.

One has to wonder how much the prayer of Jonah from chapter 2 was some kind of a “foxhole” prayer. The very first words of the prayer seem to suggest that perhaps this was, indeed, the case.

“I called to the Lord out of my distress...”

Caught in the depths of a watery grave,
sinking in the heart of the sea,
waters closing in over him,
weeds wrapped around his head,
life ebbing away,
Jonah remembers the Lord
Hurls a water-logged prayer to heaven
and discovers that even there in the deep
God is present.
Even the ocean depths can be His temple
the place where he dwells.

There, in that ocean temple, Jonah vows to come good for God.
He acknowledges that Deliverance belongs to the Lord.

And his little life is spared.
Out of God’s sheer mercy and hyperabundant grace, it is spared.

I tell you, friends -
that is something I don’t really get.
I don’t get how God’s mercy and grace could be so large.
I don’t get how God’s forgiveness can be so all-encompassing.
I don’t get how God’s patience can be so resilient.

‘Cause if I were God -
I might be sorely tempted to nuke the little twerp.
He has it coming.
Made his bed.
Now lie in it... permanently!

But I am *not* God.
And that is a *very* good thing!

Jonah is reborn and trudges off to Nineveh to deliver the message God intends him to give.
I say “trudges” because every indication is that this is *exactly* how he goes. He is the reluctant prophet - still. Even while plucking the seaweed out of his shirt collar, and shaking the water out of his ear, Jonah still is frowning.
He still doesn’t get what possible good God can see in these Assyrians.
He still doesn’t appreciate why God would want to give the a warning.
He still doesn’t want to see them live.

Jonah is a relative of the elder brother in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. That “distant cousin”, so to speak, of the prophet also walked around with a frown.
That distant cousin of Jonah also didn’t get what possible good the father saw in the little wayward fleabag who came crawling home like some pitiful dog.
The brother didn’t appreciate why the father welcomed the prodigal.
The brother didn’t want to see that prodigal alive.

Frowning, the elder brother in Jesus' parable of Luke 15, stomps off and settles himself down on the porch. He's not going inside.

Frowning, Jonah stomps off out of the city of Nineveh after preaching his message. He settles himself down on a hillside somewhere to the east of the city. He plunks himself down while muttering a death wish - "Damn those Assyrians!"

He mutters to himself, knowing that he wasn't going to witness their damnation. Instead, he'd be a witness to grace flowing in the city.

He, sitting to the east of it, would witness Yahweh's grace flow.

I'm not sure if you noticed the name of God used in verses 1-6 of chapter 4.

See how LORD is all in uppercase letters?

That signifies the personal covenant name for God - Yahweh.

Yahweh - the Great I AM who was revealed to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob

Yahweh - who set Israel free, and who brought them back to freedom again and again after they would wander away into sinful rebellion and have to be recipients of punishment.

Yahweh - who made covenant with David, and who restored this man even after a great fall into sin.

Yahweh - who had made the covenant promise to send a Saviour.

That same Yahweh of mercy extends a hand of grace to the great, sin-stained people of Nineveh.

And Jonah doesn't get it.

So he sits to the east of the city.

Alone.

Isolated from Nineveh.

Isolated from the Lord's grace.

East of the city.

East of grace.

Can you think of another time in salvation history when someone was east of grace?

Back to English class - remember John Steinbeck's book of two families struggling in California, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, seeking some sort of elusive paradise? Always short of peace, and short of grace - remember the book....

...East of Eden.

Do you know where Steinbeck got the title?

Genesis 3:24 - after humanity's fall into sin God drove them out of Paradise, out to the east, and set a guard to prevent them from re-entering.

They went into exile from God's grace.

They went east of eden.

Jonah goes east of the place where God's grace flows.

East of Nineveh.

And sulks.

How does the Lord reveal himself to the sulking prophet?

Notice how the Lord is referred to in v.6-9 during their altercation.

It is God.

The God of power.

The sovereign God.

The God who wills and chooses and acts.

God far above anything we could attain to.

God - to be obeyed.

When we insist on shrugging off grace, pushing it aside because we are demanding justice, then it is justice we will get.

Only - and here is the frightening thing -

the justice is justice coming back at us.

It becomes us who stand before the God of Justice rather than the covenant Yahweh of mercy, just like the unforgiving and graceless servant described by Jesus in Matthew 18.

The God of Judgement does the plant thing to Jonah to drive home the point about grace.

Thing is - we're never really told if Jonah gets it, or not.

Does he eventually re-enter Nineveh and celebrate the reprieve?

Does he run away to Tarshish again?

Does he go home to sulk?

We just don't know.

The story is left unfinished - just like the story about the elder brother is left unfinished. The reader is meant to complete the story and determine if grace is accepted or not.

If you permit me, one can almost Yahweh in this passage - rolling his divine eyes in frustration at that prophet.

Jonah - 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? (v.11)

Scholars are divided as to whether that means 120,000 children in the city, or 120,000 inhabitants who are spiritually like children and haven't got a clue about what God wants from them.

Either way, it is huge number of people.

And God's gracious mercy flows to them.

Problem is that Jonah doesn't see it because someone is blocking his view of divine grace. The "someone" is....

...well,

Jonah.

He's trapped in a pity party.

He wants revenge.

Assyria had been amazingly cruel to his own people.

He wanted to see them pay.

He wanted some of Israel's suffering to rub off onto those Assyrians.

And this -

this

this

THIS just simply
wasn't fair!!

As long as Jonah is caught in that self-centred wheel of logic,

He is left east of grace.

He is left outside with the prodigal's elder brother.

He is left outside of the vineyard with the workers in Jesus' parable of Matthew 20 — the workers who had toiled the whole day under the blazing sun and yet received the same pay as the workers who worked for only an hour in the cool of the later afternoon breeze.

They too are left grumbling, *It's not fair!!*

In a terrible twist of logic, Jonah can get all bothered about the disposable castor bean plant that grows quickly and dies quickly, but the eternal souls of those residents in Nineveh don't matter.

Friends. when self becomes the lens by which life is viewed, things become very quickly distorted.

When self becomes the lens by which life is viewed, values become terribly skewed.

When self becomes the lens by which life is viewed, grace is obliterated and we are left in the dark.

When self becomes the lens by which life is viewed and lived.....

Well.....

Hear Jesus out on this one:

*Whoever clings to their life will lose it,
and whoever loses their life will save it. [Luke 17:33]*

In v.3 Jonah mutters that he wants to die.

Which is ultimate irony for the guy who just a bit ago was gasping for air, tangled in seaweed, and begging God to save him.

And what is so terribly true about that verse 3 prayer is that if he leaves himself east of grace, he **will** die - eternally, horribly.

But Jonah can't see that.

He can only see himself, and some perceived hurt.

Which is so typical.

We all work with loaded scaled, you see.

We all tend to judge life in a skewed way.

Hurts against us are always worse than hurts against others.

That's one of the reasons why the conflict in the Middle East is so terribly deep and poisoned. Each side is totally huddled within themselves, feeling their own pain, bemoaning their own injustice, and wanting -

- like Jonah -

to exact revenge.

That's also part of the miracle of South Africa.

Which, under wise leadership that included Christian counsel, sought to get past the tangled pain and injustice through establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In that strange setting, revenge and punishment were not the operative word.

Grace was.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells of one hearing he attended:

One of the former homelands, the Ciskai, banned the ANC from its territory, and said it was a no-go area. And the ANC said they were not going to accept this. And so, they went on a march, a demonstration to Bisho; Bisho was the capital of this homeland. A number of people were killed because the Ciskai defense force came out, they shot and killed a number of people and injured others. We had a hearing on the so-called "Bisho Massacre." The first person who came-and the hearing was in a hall packed to the roof by people who had either been injured there, or people who had lost loved ones. And the first person who comes to testify is the former head of this Ciskain Defense Force. And I have to say, even I was riled. Not so much by what he said, as by how he said what he said. So, the tension you could cut with a knife. And then, the next set of witnesses was four officers: three black, one white. And the white was the spokesperson. And he says, "Yes, we gave the orders to the troops to open fire." Yah! The temperature just shot up! Then he turned to the audience and said, "Please forgive us. Please receive these three of my colleagues back into the community." Do you know what that audience did? That audience broke out into deafening applause. When the noise had subsided, I said, [whispering] "Let's keep quiet, because we are in the presence of something holy. Really, we ought to take off our shoes, because we are standing on holy ground."

That is grace.

Self is taken out of the centre.

That South Africa has ANY hope of moving forward,

ANY hope AT ALL

is a sheer miracle of grace - where self disappears, and a hand is extended.

Grace is a miracle that God gives.

Oh, Jonah, can you see it?

Grace - shown in the one for whom Jonah was a precursor.

Jesus - who went into the heart of the earth for three days and then rose up again, says Matthew 12.

Jesus, son of God,

God's great grace gift to sinners like the Ninevites.
You and I.

I wonder if any of the angels muttered while Jesus came to earth?

I wonder if any of the angels had trouble getting it why the son of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! [Phil 2]

Great grace.

Did you know that Jesus' story of grace,
like Jonah's story
and the elder brother's story
is an unfinished story?

It is unfinished because you and I are meant to complete the story.
Jesus returns to heaven, and we are called to complete the account by our response.

Who stands at the centre?

Our life tells the response.

The way we handle our money will be a good illustration of the response - whether it is all spent on self, or a good chunk sent back to the Lord's work.

The way we view this church is a good illustration – is it **our** church for **our** programs that **we** enjoy? What about when something happens that isn't exactly your preferred way of doing things? How do you respond?

How about the very basics of living at home - do you treat your spouse or brother or sister with grace? Or do you find yourself trying to measure back to them the sort of treatment that you feel they've been dealing to you?

Who stands at the centre?

Friends, I said at the beginning that I don't get why God didn't just let the little twerp of a prophet drown.

Because I struggle all the time with a self that really wants to hog centre stage. I find it very easy to measure out my treatment of others by how I perceive I'm being treated. And constantly need to check that - and seek the Lord's forgiveness for that.

And breathe a **huge** prayer of gratitude that Jesus **didn't** and **doesn't** operate that way.

That His hand of grace remains extended to me, as His Father's hand was extended to Nineveh.

Monday, though, is just around the corner.

I can't stay in this sanctuary.

I have to go out to face the world and write another paragraph in my conclusion of the story of grace.

And so do you.

What will that paragraph say?