

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
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Jonah 3:1-4:3 and Mark 5:21-43

In this season after Christmas, after all the anticipation of the Messiah coming, we've been talking not about the baby Jesus, but about Jesus as an adult and his emerging ministry. And we've been getting at this through different experiences or perspectives, how these reveal important aspects of who Jesus is, and what he is about. Today, we focus on the perspective or experience of the Gentile. For Jesus came first to the Jews, grew up around small Jewish villages around the sea of Galilee. And these believed the Messiah was for them, and not for others unlike them, such as the non-Jew, or the gentile. They had their own boundaries and binaries.

The gentile, or outsider tends to show up in biblical stories in two ways. One as a motif where the outsider has a perspective or a responsiveness that the insider is too ingrained or thick-headed to get. Therefore, it takes being humbled by the obedience of the one you wouldn't expect it from. An example is the story of the good Samaritan, a parable that features priests, Levites, Jews, but who is the one who exemplifies God's law and what it means to be a neighbor to someone in need? The Samaritan, the outsider, the person you might tend to look down upon. So, we have the motif of the exemplary outsider. The other way the gentile shows up is that the boundaries that limit God's love and grace expand or dissolve. As in, now gentiles are not outside of God's people but have equal chance to be a part of God's people. Paul declares that in Christ there is now no longer Jew or Greek. The distinction doesn't hold any longer.

Our passages this morning illustrate both of these, the outsider as example, and the outsider as part of the kingdom. In our gospel reading, Jesus goes to the other side of the lake, as in not the west side with Jewish villages, but the other side towards the Decapolis and the Greek cities, the gentile side of the lake. Right before our passage Jesus had a demoniac running at him and pigs hurling down the hill into the sea. Whenever we are on the "other" side of the lake, the issue of gentiles and unclean-ness are on the front burner. And so it is, here.

We have two intertwined experiences. A young girl, a young innocent Jewish girl, the daughter of the synagogue leader, very sick and in need of healing. So just as Jesus gets to the other side of the lake, the need of this little Jewish girl and the plea of her father for his daughter has Jesus starting back. But he gets disrupted by an unclean woman with a bleeding condition who Jesus will also call daughter. A

woman, presumably gentile, who has lived hard years, sought help and could never find it, desperate, though ashamed, and despite all this acts both covertly but in great faith. As the exemplary outsider, she demonstrates a faith that rivals or even superceeds that of Jairus, the synagogue leader. And the way these two stories resolve sets these two ladies next to each other in a way that shows their similarity, and it demonstrates Jesus' equal compassion, grace, and healing extended to both Jew and Gentile, the boundaries dissolving.

The story of Jonah also gets at these themes as well, showing the pettiness and short-sightedness of the prophet and also the reality that God's grace extends beyond the boundaries and groups we have come to both see, defend, and rely on. The book of Jonah sets the attitudes and actions of Jonah against the attitudes and receptiveness of gentiles, both the sailors in the ship, and the people and leadership of Nineveh.

The first motif is aimed at helping us see things about ourselves that we have become hardened to, and to see others more compassionately as a result, seeing our commonalities and our equal place needing grace and kindness, love and forgiveness. The second calls us to reimagine how God's love is extended to any who respond, dissolving the boundaries and boxes, labels and categories that have come to organize our world with. And if you don't think we still create groups to hate or feel separate from and to make ourselves feel right or more righteous, just listen to the political rhetoric in this election year.

Jonah gets at such distinctions in a humorous and hyperbolic manner. It is well-crafted story that reads at times more like an SNL skit than a literal telling of events. For as the story opens, picture the SNL skit, God gives Jonah a word to take to the Ninevites, and Jonah takes that word and runs in the opposite direction, boarding a boat to the other end of the known world trying to get away from God, literally flee from God's presence. You can hear God in the SNL skit saying, "I still seeeee youuu."

Jonah is introduced to us humorously, sounding more like buffoon than righteous prophet. We know little if anything about the actual prophet. We do know that Jonah, a prophet is mentioned one time in the Old Testament, in II King 14:25. He functioned as a prophet during the reign of King Reheboam II, sometime in the low 700s B.C. And during that time Assyria, whose major city was Nineveh, was a powerful empire and a consistent threat to Israel's East in a season when Israel is trying to claw back some of its territory from them. That region of Mesopotamia, whenever Jonah may have been written, represents the arch enemy, the aggressor, the threat to security, independence, and identity; the conqueror and the colonizer.

It was around 721 BC that Assyria conquered northern Israel, and about 135 years later, the Babylonians, the next great power from that same region will conquer Judah, destroy the temple, and carry many off into exile.

Whenever the book of Jonah is written down *about* Jonah, it is clearly tapping into the attitudes towards “those people”, “that nation,” as well as questions of how to understand these events and the changing landscape of what it means to be God’s people, blessed to be a blessing. Their world had become more complicated. We get a whiff of the question of whether God is going to continue to favor one nation over another, namely God’s chosen over those “other peoples.” We get a whiff of the question of whether somebody is worthy to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness when they have done so much wrong. Furthermore, what makes one’s response to God worthy of mercy? How far does God’s presence extend? – even to the ends of the known world? These are some of the questions brought forth.

So, enjoy the story-telling. The Lord’s prophet tries to flee from God’s presence, heading off into the chaos waters. He hides on a boat with pagan sailors. The sea whips up and threatens all their lives. The sailors show more fear of the Lord than the prophet does, more responsiveness and willingness to discern what God wants, more reverence for the value of a life, more readiness to pray and seek God’s presence and help. Jonah hides, the sailors pray. Jonah puts the sailors lives in danger, and offers to be thrown overboard thus surrendering his own life, but the sailors do everything they can to try to preserve Jonah’s life. The pagans have more reverence for life than the prophet.

Enter the fish, or should I say enter Jonah into the fish. Essentially, Jonah wanted to flee God’s presence and is now in a place associated with God’s absence, that is the sea and its mysterious and dangerous creatures, and now he is crying out for God’s help. What a piece of work. As Jonah is crying out, we get a song, very similar to one of the psalms. He sings of being consigned to Sheol, to death, of longing for the presence of the Lord and the temple. Ironic isn’t it. First he is fleeing God’s presence, but now he is getting what he wanted and is changing his mind, praying for God’s mercy, and deliverance, promising that if God delivers, he will change his life and attitude and be obedient to God’s call.

God grants such deliverance to the rebellious prophet. Jonah gets relief from the whale of God’s judgment that he entered due to his own rebelliousness. He is therefore brought from death to life, spit up on the shore, returned to house, home, and temple.

Jonah is turned, for the moment, from rebellious prophet to obedient prophet. Now he goes in the right direction. He preaches to the great city of Nineveh the message with which God has charged him with. He preaches, and then he finds a nice look-out on the edge of the city. He sets up camp and he waits for those forty days to be over to see what the Lord shall do with them.

And what happens? The Ninevites listen. They corroborate the message with their own prophets likely, or other methods of divination and they take it seriously. They deliberate together what should be the best response to this God of Israel. They declare a fast and show penitence and grief through wearing sackcloth and ashes.

Their response is told in exaggerated fashion so to emphasize their “overzealousness” to deter death and punishment. The king declares that all shall fast, even the animals; all shall wear sackcloth and ashes, even down to the sheep, as if the animals’ penitence can increase their odds.

They are doing everything they can to appease the anger of God. Do they love God – we don’t know. Will they honor God in the future and for any reasons of respect or honor or affection – hard to say, though quite possibly not. God watches their response like a parent listening to their child’s plea for clemency for the umpteenth repeated offense.

And what happens? God forgives them, and does not carry through with the judgment. Jonah gets mad. He does not celebrate their responsiveness nor the preservation of life. He gets mad, saying “I knew this was going to happen.” Jonah thinks that God has been played for a fool. Jonah seems more intent on preserving God’s honor and pride than God is. God is content to relent. Jonah wanted to watch the destruction from his bleacher on the hillside.

But then we have to ask, is God’s gracious treatment of the Ninevites all that different from what has already happened with Jonah? Jonah showed belligerence and rebellion. Jonah refused to listen to the word of the Lord. Jonah ran from God’s presence, wanting the destruction of an entire people, and when he ended up on his way to Sheol, fearful of his own death and destruction, he cried out for mercy; God heard and had compassion, spitting him up on dry land. But does Jonah see it that way? And furthermore, how long does Jonah’s repentance last for, as he goes right back to where he started; angry and not wanting God to be merciful to the Ninevites.

Chapter 4: 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.”

The absurdity and arrogance of it starts to be plainly seen, as he is complaining to God for being to others, what God had just been to him. It is amazing how blind we can be; how slow to acknowledge how gracious God has been to us, how free Grace was when it first came to us. And where Jonah pitches a fit to God, angry enough to die, he does so under the very same grace and compassion of God. He can get angry with God because he knows God will not wipe him out for it. He is relying on God’s mercy even as he protests it.

Both the story of Jonah and the gospel story of these two daughters invite us to new perspective. For as Jesus, the Messiah, is building his ministry, he does not do it on the scaffolding of us vs them, of defining who we are as being not like that other people or group. He invites us, instead, to a perspective that is able to see our own fickleness, to be reminded that we are God’s children only by grace, not by some quality or credential that makes us better or different than others. And he asks us to reconceive of the gospel in a way that it brings all of us together in the experience of grace, rather than pushing others away because we are somehow different or superior or inferior.

And perhaps a measure of the success of these stories, a measure of whether they have seeped into us, is if we can trace the line of grace in our own lives. Can you look at your own life and see how God’s patience, kindness, and mercy have prevailed when you were blind, petulant, self-involved, rebellious, arrogant, foolish, and prideful. Or do we still think we are better than others, more righteous, more worthy, more faithful?

Because when we can retrace the drama of grace in our own journey, we might be more prone to find it in others’ journey as well, and we might start to come together not because of common attitudes of superiority, but by a common wonder at the grace of God, and the ministry of a messiah who shows that grace and love to all equally. And when we realize that, will we participate in that movement, or sit on our bleacher and pout?

And all God’s people said...

A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed

(Mt 9:18–26; Lk 8:40–56)

²¹ When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²² Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³ and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” ²⁴ So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰ Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹ And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’ ” ³² He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

³⁵ While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” ³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” ³⁷ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸ When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹ When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” ⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” ⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³ He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

JONAH

Jonah Tries to Run Away from God

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

⁷ The sailors^a said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹ “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

^{17b} But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

^a Heb *They*

^b Ch 2.1 in Heb

A Psalm of Thanksgiving

- 2 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,
“I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
- ³ You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
- ⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
how^a shall I look again
upon your holy temple?’
- ⁵ The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
- ⁶ at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O LORD my God.
- ⁷ As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
- ⁸ Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
- ⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”

^a Theodotion: Heb *surely*

¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Conversion of Nineveh

3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

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.

Jonah’s Anger

4 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,^a 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.”

Jonah Is Reproved

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

^a Heb *qiqayon*, possibly *the castor bean plant*

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?”