

Jonah 2/2 Text: 3:1-4:11

Introduction:

Friends! We're continuing our walk through the Minor Prophets. Obadiah, Joel, Amos, and we're in our second, and last, look at Jonah, this "truth-telling" book, as we saw it called last week.

This morning, I basically want to present us with a handful of very real points that we can say Jonah makes, and the Spirit will, I'm sure, point us to whichever one is most important for us to hear, and live into, today.

Simple enough?

Two Things:

And next week, you know, we're entering Advent, and rather than continue with the Minor Prophets, we're going to interrupt our walk through them, and focus on the traditional themes of Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. I'm excited about it. We skipped focusing on these last year, in order to shorten our time in Matthew, so I'm excited about Advent, and thinking about these virtues again, together.

And also, I have to make something clear to us. We hear about Nineveh everyday. It's called Mosul now, a city in Northern Iraq. It's bombed to bits, a casualty of war whose reasons are cultural, deeply religious, driven by a thousand

evils. Hundreds of thousands of people have been made war refugees there, over the past few years, and thousands of people have died, have been forcibly conscripted, have been simply lost or made orphans. And whatever else Jonah has to say about the “Great City of Ninevah,” God, I think, is still desperately concerned with those who have suffered under the violence that’s been visited upon it over the past, oh, four years.

But it’s very far away, you know? And it’s easier to talk about ancient Nineveh, than modern razed, emptied, bloody Mosul. That’s okay. I get it. But to ignore it completely felt like sin. So, whenever you hear of Mosul, pray at least, and remember that Jonah’s hate can’t be ours, whatever else we could say.

Right now, let’s pray for today, and this conversation. (There’s no way to transition easily from that, right?)

Prayer:

All Sorts Of Things:

I thought of all sorts of ways to frame today’s message, you know? Maybe we could try to talk about Jonah’s “Main Point,” or the handful of them people argue about. I thought maybe we could spend time on a few of the more obscure, but important--at least interesting--side conversations Jonah invites.

What I want to do is this, though: I want to pretend that Jonah is answering questions that we have. That's all. I want us to pretend we have questions about God, maybe pretend we're ancient Israelites, just wondering about things, and Jonah is what God has given us to answer the questions that we have.

Here's the first one:

Answering Questions:

Why does prophecy fail?

Why does prophecy fail? Pretend that's your question: Why does prophecy fail sometimes? Why do declarations of doom not come true?

If we were in that dogmatic camp that says Jonah is only about one thing, we'd declare, full of conviction, "Jonah has been given to us to explain why what God declares by his prophets sometimes doesn't come true."

Or, we'd say, it was give to ancient Israel to explain why what their prophets declared sometimes didn't come true.

Failed: Perhaps

Remember, way back when we introduced this series, that there were tests on a prophet: If the prophet led Israel to worship other Gods, that prophet was definitely not "real."

And if the prophet declared something was going to happen, but it didn't, that prophet was definitely untrustworthy. You could ignore them from here on out. The prophets recognized this; they knew that some of what they said might not come to pass. We saw in Amos a couple of weeks ago his declaration, "Seek good, not evil...perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph." We assume Amos would have been happy to be out of a job, and back shepherding, because anyone savvy in Israel would have recognized that once Amos' prophecy didn't come true, they were out of a job.

In everything the prophets said, there was a perhaps. And Jonah, more than any of the other prophets, reveals why the "perhaps" exists, even though Amos hints at it. It exists because of God's merciful response to repentance.

If some ancient Israelite were asking, "Why does prophecy fail?" Why doesn't some declaration of doom that a prophet gives come about? The major answer would be, simply, because whoever heard the judgment on them repented, and God responded to their repentance with mercy.

Failed: Repentance

Repentance is at the heart of Jonah. Jonah declares doom, Nineveh repents, God relents. This is the movement of the book, you know.

Remember, Jonah has the most successful preaching campaign any prophet ever had. He launches his three-day ministry to Nineveh, and by day one, everyone's repented.

Jonah launches in: ***"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."***

(It'd be like, 38 more days by the time he gets to the suburbs, but he doesn't have to keep going. Immediately, on day one:

5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

6 When Jonah's warning 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.

He also declares this:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 8 But let people and animals 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."

10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Failed: An answer!

Why does prophecy fail? Why do messages of doom not come true? It's because people hear them, and turn to God in hopeful repentance. God is not out to punish people, hoping to punish people; God's out to be heard by them, and responded to with repentance and all that it means: humility, turning away from evil, doing good, taking on faithfulness.

And look, the city, from top to bottom, doesn't know if their repentance will matter; they only know that God is the only one with any power to change what's coming. Repentance is one of the most powerful moves we can make, because it acknowledges how powerless we are over our lives. It's one of the few great ways we can flex our limited power as creatures, as created beings. No one can force repentance from us; God can't force repentance from us. But God can, and does, make clear what unrepentance, and a commitment to evil, can bring to people.

Nineveh realizes what little power they have, and they use it well. They repent. Their "who knows?" question turns into "We know!" and celebration.

And God knew, all along, that if they'd repent at Jonah's declaration of doom, the prophecy would go unfulfilled.

Jonah knew, too. He rages bitterly, soon after: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

Why does prophecy fail? It fails, now and then, because repentance turns away the doom God's prophets declare is coming.

Jonah hates this, of course. He wants God to destroy Nineveh.

Answering Questions:

Why doesn't God kill our enemies?

And Jonah's bitter anger points us to another question that Jonah seeks to answer.

It's a question Israel was desperate to have answered. It's a question anyone who has been where Israel has been--small, abused, put-upon, rarely able to rest, rarely free from the antagonism of those who are jealous of them, or the dehumanizing, appeasing obsequiousness they're forced to offer those who threaten them.

Why doesn't God kill our enemies? Why doesn't God protect us that way?

Killing: Sides

Remember, fundamental to Israel's sense of self was the idea that they were God's chosen People. We know that, by the time Jonah rolls around, that sense of being chosen for the world, as an agent of blessing, had been, if not lost, then nearly lost. And Israel was a people at war, constantly, from their founding to their end, constantly threatened, enemies within and without, fracturing and divided and wiped out in stages by those who had bigger weapons and better ways to kill them.

It's a very small step from "We are God's Chosen People." To "God is always on our side." It's a small step from "God is on our side," to "God is against everyone who isn't." It just doesn't take much to leap from the knowledge that you are special and unique, to becoming entitled and demanding. And one of Israel's basic assumptions was that their enemies, who were made for all sorts of reasons that didn't necessarily have to do with God, must also be God's enemies. And in entitlement, which is so human, what else would any of us do but wish God would give our enemies what they deserve.

And you know, I've never been wronged. Not in a deep, terrible way. Every heart knows its own sorrow; every muscle has a memory of the hurts we've lived through. But my life

has been relatively charmed, and I don't have many people I want to see God destroy. To be in my position is, frankly, a luxury; it's to be on the top side of history.

Killing: Making Enemies

But we're always being tempted to make enemies of others. To be a person, living in a world soaked in sin, is to be told we have enemies, even if we don't. The world is oriented toward dividing us in all the ways the New Testament says, in Jesus, we're no longer divided: by language, by nationality, by sex, by ethnicity, and race. We're continually told others are our enemies, are dangerous and meant to be feared, and we should be suspicious of them. When difference is stoked, by sin, into antagonism, war, and violence, then we're rallied by our own sin, our own sense of what's just, to wish--if not pray--that God would just deal with them, our enemies, who we are tricked into believing, subtly and cleverly, are God's enemies, too.

It might be Satan's greatest trick to get us to believe God is against others, because once we've come to believe God is against someone, we people--and Christians, too, to our shame--can justify any sort of evil against them. We turn into agents of hate and agents of death, cheering on vengeance and violence against whole swaths of those we've come to think of as our enemies. The devil can just lean back and relax, then; we take over his death-dealing work.

Killing: Against God

But Jonah reveals a truth that is terrible in its simplicity: Our enemies are not God's enemies. Our enemies are not God's enemies. And the terror in it is twofold: In the first place, we realize wherever our cues are coming from, they aren't coming from God. In the second, we realize that in making enemies of others, and assuming God is on our side, we ourselves subtly leave God's side. To do this is to give up on every promise we claim as Christians.

Jonah, in his anger, says, ***“Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to [put off] by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”***

Jonah hates Nineveh. He would rather die than see this enemy of Israel live. And now that they've acted in faith, now that God has spared them, he wants to die. Why live, if God's betrayed you by being good, when what you hoped for was for God to be evil?

4 But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

And Jonah doesn't answer. God doesn't answer. The question

hangs there, for us: Is it right for Jonah to be angry?

Jonah marches off and waits, watching the city to see what will come upon it, if anything. He waits, we assume, for 30 days, hoping God won't relent, hoping Nineveh gives up their repentance, or takes up evil, or celebrating when he sees them doing it. Who knows? He just sits there for a month, hoping God will destroy his enemies--not God's enemies, Jonah's, his own.

Meanwhile, the weeks pass, and plant grows. And Jonah appreciates the plant for the shade it provides; God kills the plant. Sends a worm that eats it up. I kept thinking of the squash we grew this summer, and how fast they'd grow, and how fast squash borers destroyed some of them. God blows up a wind. Jonah, with Nineveh still standing, and his plant dead, wants to die.

Jonah has been betrayed, you know? And he really has been betrayed, but not by God, by his own hatred, which he has nurtured for every waking minute of the past month, and who knows how long before that.

God asks, as Jonah bakes,

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

And Jonah responds in this way. Notice it. There's no reasoning here. There's no rationality. There's pure emotion.

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

Jonah is raging. Angry that God didn't destroy his enemies. Angry that his prophecy, now a month old, has gone unrealized, so full of anger that he wants to die simply because what he'd gotten used to, over the past 30 days, was taken from him.

10 But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Killing: An answer!

Jonah, again, doesn't answer God, and God gave us the ending to Jonah that we have, which ends without an answer. This question is answer enough. Why doesn't God destroy our enemies? Because our enemies are not God's enemies. Our enemies are God's creation, about which he cares far, far more than we can imagine ourselves ever caring.

God doesn't praise Nineveh here. He, in a God-like way, calls

them morons. But they are his morons, they are his creation, and their animals are his animals. Jonah was emotionally attached to a plant, and Jonah is a bitter, angry, hate-filled person. God is emotionally attached to this city of morons, and God is not a bitter, angry, or hate-filled creator, but the one who made the heavens and the earth and all of the creatures that abide here.

What does Jonah teach us?

So where are we? What does Jonah teach us? What's its point? It answers questions we--or, at least, Israel--might have.

Why does prophecy fail? Why do declarations of doom just never come true? They don't come true because repentance turns away the doom God's prophets declare is coming. Repentance overcomes promises of doom; humility turns away punishment.

Why doesn't God destroy our enemies, once and for all, just get rid of them? Because our enemies are not God's enemies, and the hate and bitterness that drive us are not character traits of God.

One more question Jonah answers.

Answering Questions: What is God doing?

Jonah answers, for Israel, a question that is not just one

asked by ancient Israel, by the people who wrote and lived out Kings and Chronicles, but by everyone I've ever met. It's not a satisfying answer to most of us, but it's a real one.

Jonah answers the question, "What is God doing?"

Just, generally, "What is God doing?" If God is God, how is God connecting to the world at all? How is God engaged in the stuff that's going on all around us?

And the answer that we have is, sometimes, "More than we know."

Doing: Mystery

All the hilarity of Jonah should also be, for us, a slap in the face to our tightly ordered, structured world. Because the truth is that mystery is in play in Jonah, deep and wild things that we can't pin down are swirling around. Who would have expected Nineveh to respond the way they did? Who would have expected Jonah to be such a bitter, hateful person and still a prophet of God, useful in the work of concern God wanted to show this city? Who would have expected God to care about animals? Or the sailors to worship God as best as they knew how to? Who would have expected to survive a few days in a fish's stomach? Or God to destroy a perfectly good plant, simply to teach someone a lesson on how careless they are with their wishes for destruction?

Doing: Making Sense

The reason Jonah is so deeply compelling is because it mirrors for us our own experiences of making sense of the world we live in, which is that sometimes, most of the time, we're throwing our hands up in the air and saying, "I don't know what's going on."

We plan, and we pray, and we do all sorts of things in order for all sorts of expectations to be realized around us, and, most of the time, it's a mystery how anything works out at all. And here we are, together on this Sunday morning, gathering as the congregation we are, trying to be an agent of blessing and builders of God's Kingdom, and bearers of truth in the world, and who would have thought we'd have ended up here, of all places?

Doing: Working Out

And yet, just like in Jonah, all the plot twists, all the ridiculous leaps, all the characters that act in ways that no one could have planned on, behind all of it is a God who is working something out, just like that--it's true of us, too. This far removed from all that Israel knew, we have so much more insight into the character of God than they had, and we've inherited so many promises that they barely knew to ask for, and yet, we still find ourselves wondering, often, "How did I get here, of all places? This life, this home, this spouse, this church, this situation?" God is working something out, and Paul tells us it's good for us, in a way that is good that we

can recognize.

That's a miracle. The miracle of our lives is that they are mysterious, and all the plot twists, all the unexpected turns, all the miracles that seem to happen around us, and even the tragedy, the sorrow, the trouble...these things have worked out such that here we are, still keeping faith, still discovering God is working out salvation, for us and all creation, and we're participants in it as we discover daily mercy.

We're given just enough, in this world, and as Christians more than so many, to see that behind the mystery of our collective and individual stories is a God who is actively plotting something good, and we're a part of that good--for ourselves and all creation.

Doing: An answer!

Jonah answers our "What is God doing?" with a response that declares, "More than we realize." God is active, and engaged, and working through more than we can realize, doing more than we would have imagined, in order to spread Christ's redemption far and wide in the world. We're meant to keep our eyes open, to see as we see in Jonah how in the moment these things that happen to and among us make no sense at all, and yet God is not disengaged, but actively working through them, for the common good of all creation, and the particular good of those who have given themselves over to

Him.

That giving is a hard thing to do. It's hard to appreciate the mysterious plot-creating work of God when we're anywhere near the emotional place Jonah was, and so many things in our lives lead us there. And yet: God is with us. We are not alone. As we lean into the Spirit, I hope we realize that God is doing more than we realize, even in the middle of all the things that we experience as just sheer craziness.

Again:

So again: Jonah reveals that sometimes prophecy doesn't come true, and it's wonderful, because repentance can stop doom in its tracks. Jonah reveals that our enemies are not God's, no matter who it was who told us that they were. Our enemies are not God's enemies, but he is creator of everything, and everyone, and concerned about all of us together. And Jonah reveals that there is more going on around us than we realize, and our powerful God is working something out, all the time; in our lives, in our world, in all creation. We are surrounded by mystery, and our stories are ones plotted out in mercy, grace, and the great capacity of a God who is doing good things we wouldn't think to expect.

Let's look, this week, for the mystery around us, and glimpses of how powerfully creative and full of capacity God is to guide our lives toward goodness. Let's remember that our enemies are not God's; and in fact, if we wish to line

ourselves up with him, our concern has to be much broader than our clan, our group, our folks; it has to be all creatures, great and small, black or white, rich or poor. And let's remember that repentance is not only one of our most personal, great powers, but something that has stopped the very word of God coming about, and may still again. "Who's to say?"