

Natalie W. Bell
January 24, 2021

Ok, God
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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.....

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.

So, most of us are **familiar** with this story of Jonah,
It’s not history, it’s a **STORY**—with a lesson we all could use, especially today.
So, let’s recap...

The story begins when God sends Jonah to Nineveh—
the Assyrian capital,
The Assyrians are Gentiles, enemies, wicked pagan people,
according to the Israelites.
And God decided to send Jonah to prophesy the city,
Warning them to turn from their evil ways or they would be destroyed!

But **Jonah thought he knew better than God.**
After all, the **Assyrians are not HIS people.**
They are a different nation, a different race, pagans.

Why should he care for the Ninevites?
And what are the chances they would listen, anyway?
Seemed like a losing assignment,
so he decided to jump on a ship to **Tarshish**,
in the opposite direction of Nineveh!

And, as we all know, you **can run from God, but you can't hide---**
 So God brought a huge storm, and the Gentiles on that ship were scared,
 Especially when they heard that Jonah was running away from God!
 So Jonah was thrown overboard....but he didn't drown,
 God sent a **big fish** to swallow him up,
 Where he stayed for three days and nights!

In that fish, **Jonah prayed.**
 Until finally that big fish spit him out---
 and this Hebrew guy was smelling like fish!

But God didn't care.
 You can run from God, but you cannot hide, right?
 So God sent Jonah to Nineveh again,
 And this time Jonah went—reluctantly.
Ok, God. Ok.

Which is where the story picks up today.
*Jonah began to go into the city, ... And he cried out,
 "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

How about that for a concise sermon?
 A **simple prophecy—with no mention** of God, hope, or grace.

And I'm sure Jonah shared that message with great enthusiasm---Or not.
 Strangely, his preaching was an **incredible success!**
⁵*And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone,
 great and small, put on sackcloth.....*

Wow.
 Who would have guessed that?
 Sulky, pouty Jonah and his sermon of one sentence—
 And suddenly these enemies, these wicked people with no morals,
 Were changing their ways!

So much that,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.*

But the story doesn't end there!

In chapter 4, Jonah has a fit.

He's pouting, griping, complaining about God's grace for the Ninevites!

He can't believe this will be his legacy!

Jonah chapter 4 says:

*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 ...and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.*

Are you kidding?

Jonah is MAD that God is gracious and merciful? Full of love?

So guess what God does next?

He strikes Jonah down, right?

Puts him in his place, sets him straight, right?

No.

None of that.

Instead ***God provides a bush*** to grow up over him and provide him shade!

But that didn't satisfy, so God sent a worm to eat the bush,

And ***Jonah complained again*** about his pitiful life,

Wanting to die.

The story ***ends with God asking Jonah, how can you be angry?***

How can you care more about a bush giving shade?

Then all the people and animals that live in Nineveh?

The story is a reminder to us,
That we can run from God, but we cannot hide.
 Our God will go to the ends of the earth, to find us!
 God is ***persistent, merciful and gracious,***
 For ALL people, including our enemies.

It's also a story about US—
 When ***we have a bad attitude.***
 I mean look at Jonah—he is the epitome of a bad attitude!
 He is ANGRY about God's mercy and grace!

When it comes to bad attitudes,
 We've all been there, right?
 We all have people who are our Ninevites—
 Those who are not OUR people.

We all have problems with THOSE people.
 THEM.
 The OTHERS.
 Those people we feel are NOT deserving of God's grace.

Who are those people for you?
Who are your Ninevites?
 We all have them.

In this day and age,
 it seems like this happens so often between people of ***different politics.***
 Republicans think of Democrats as THEM.
 Democrats feel the same way about Republicans.
 Liberals scorn Conservatives,
 And Conservatives scorn Liberals.
 And both sides ***mischaracterize*** the other side with broad strokes—
Believing the lies we all hear about people on the other side!

It's easier to make our enemies into a CARICATURE.
 instead of listening, learning, trying to understand them.

The truth is ***NO side is what we hear on the news.***
 People are complicated, situations are complex.
 Gray exists in this crazy world.

And we are wrong when we start believing that all of THEM
 Are ***not OUR people....***
 And we really get into trouble when we believe that
THEY don't deserve God's love and grace!

So what can we do?

Well, let's think about God in this story.
 God is ***relentless, in calling Jonah*** to join his mission.
God is also FULL of grace—and I mean full.
 Grace for the people of Nineveh,
 And grace for pitiful Jonah.

Thank goodness.
 Because the truth is, ***Jonah probably needs the grace MORE than the Ninevites.***
 He is the one on his high horse,
 So sure that he's right, that he's better than THOSE people.

Kind of reminds you of the ***older brother of the prodigal son.***
 Remember him?
 He stays at home, dutifully serving his father,
 while little brother runs off squandering the inheritance he took early!

Jesus says in Luke: Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'
²⁸ *Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property*

with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’³¹ Then the father^[e] said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

How often have we been like THAT?

With the attitude of the older brother?

What God really wants from us is to consider how

We might LOVE those people—our enemies.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery in 1957 said this about ***loving our enemies***:

“far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.

King said that the first step to loving our enemies is ***looking at ourselves***.

Realizing that we have ***both good and evil within*** ourselves,

Just like Paul said when spoke about our tendency to do what is wrong!

King said there is kind of a ***North and South, at war*** within our own hearts.

None of us is exempt.

So, we should remember Jesus words in Matthew 7 when he said,

*how can you remove the ***speck*** in your brother’s eye*

*when there’s a ***plank*** in your own eye?*

Loving our enemies means ***realizing others may not like us***

because of something we have done.

For instance, even though we live in a great democracy, we are not perfect,

there are legitimate reasons other nations do not like us.

He said another step to loving our enemies is ***seeing something good in them***.

But how is that even possible?

He points us to the ***Greek language***, and their ***different words for love***.

Eros—or romantic love.

Philos—or brotherly love.

And **Agape**—the kind of love God has for all people.
 This agape love is actually the **kind of love we can and should have** for others—
We can love them—because God loves them!

King points out that **Jesus did NOT say we must LIKE our enemies.**
 We are called to **LOVE them.**
 Agape love them.

We are called to be the stronger person.

And refuse to give into hate.
 He gives an example of driving down the highway when no one is dimming their
 bright lights---we have to **be the person to step up** and dim our lights.
 Someone has to **show some sense, and strength**, and it should be us!

But the most important reason to love our enemies is that
hating them destroys us.
 And loving them—has the power to **redeem and transform—**
 us, our enemies, and our world.

Abraham Lincoln is an example of someone who loved his enemies.
 When he was running for President,
 Edwin Stanton had nothing but negative, hateful things to say about Lincoln.

But when Lincoln won the Presidency,
 he **appointed Stanton** as his Secretary of War in the Cabinet.
 People thought he was crazy.
 But when Lincoln was assassinated,
 guess who had the most eloquent things to say about Lincoln?
 Stanton.

Lincoln's ability to love his enemies brought redemption.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

Friends—we all have Ninevites.
But God is calling us to see them differently.
 To see them as children of God.
 Worthy of salvation, worthy of love.

We are not perfect, and we should admit that.
Still, we are called to love others,
Because God loves them.

Hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today:
We have been called to extend the good news—
To even the Ninevites.
May God give us the strength to do so,
The strength to love, even our enemies.
And for this grace, all God's people say, Amen.