

A few minutes ago, Cynthia led us in the Assurance of Pardon, by quoting Scripture: “God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” This beautiful verse appears more than 10 times throughout the Old Testament, as a statement of faith in the one God. It was a standard way to articulate the magnificent goodness of God. It’s connected to one of the overarching themes of Bible: God created humans out of love, for a relationship of love with God and with each other, yet humans over and over again were unable to live up to God’s intentions. God gave the ancient Hebrew people so many blessings: God’s presence, deliverance from slavery in Egypt, guidance and provision through the wilderness, a land flowing with milk and honey, and yet the people continued to wander from God, disappoint God, rebel against God. So God sent prophets, to call the people to faithfulness, but that didn’t work either, so God sent Jesus. Throughout it all, God remained “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” We continue in that pattern even today: even with our best intentions, we fall short of God’s intentions for our lives. We are irritable with those we love most, we pass by neighbors in need, we hold on to grudges rather than forgiving someone, we harm ourselves or others by our words and by our actions, we are judgmental toward others.

The amazing thing is: God keeps pursuing us, in love. God is eager to forgive us, eager to shower us with blessings, eager to transform our lives with grace. It is good news that God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

Well, the Old Testament prophet Jonah didn’t think it was good news. Now, if I said the word Jonah, and asked what word first pops into your head, you’d probably say “whale”. That story has captured the imaginations of folks throughout the centuries: a guy named Jonah ends up in the belly of a big fish, and then is vomited up on the shore, and lives to tell about it. Well, there’s a whole lot more to the story of Jonah. Let’s look beyond the fantastical story of Jonah being swallowed by a whale to see what this story has to tell us, about God, about Jonah, and about ourselves. If the book of Jonah were a play, it would have 5 scenes:

1. In Israel: God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, a large, wicked city, in a foreign country, to tell them to repent of their evil ways. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrians, who were the enemies of Israel; they were known for their brutality and their violence. Jonah didn’t want to go, so he runs in the opposite direction, and hops on a boat going to Spain.
2. At sea: A storm comes up, the sailors are afraid, they pray, and they begin throwing excess cargo overboard to save the ship. Jonah admits to the sailors that he’s running away from God, and he tells them to throw him overboard, as a way to calm the storm. They don’t want to do that, but finally, in desperation and at Jonah’s insistence, they do.

3. In the belly of the big fish: Jonah prays a long, eloquent, sincere prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance. Jonah then is vomited back onto the shore. The Word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time, calling him to go to Nineveh, so this time he does.
4. He goes, but his heart is not in it. He's like a teenager who's been asked to take out the garbage: he gets only part-way into the city, and his entire message in Hebrew is 5 words. Amazingly, the entire city repents, everyone from the king on down; they turn from their evil ways, and they seek forgiveness from God.
5. The final scene, which takes place outside Nineveh, is our text for the day, Jonah 3:10-4:11.

*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 this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' 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.*

*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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 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.'*

*But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'*

And that's the end of the book! Ouch! Jonah is livid because God decides not to punish the Ninevites after all; the Hebrew says Jonah is "displeased with a great displeasure" and "burned up". Jonah says to God: "That's why I didn't want to go in the first place: I knew you are merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." (This last phrase also appears in the book of Joel, as an extension of the familiar statement of faith.) To Jonah, God is being soft on sinners. These wicked, violent people, who had perpetrated unspeakable cruelty against the Hebrew people, do not deserve to be forgiven by God. To Jonah, this mercy-thing has gotten way out of hand; God has crossed the line.

Jonah seems not to remember that God forgave him, for running in the opposite direction; Jonah seems not to remember that God delivered him from the belly of the big fish. Jonah seems not to remember that God had forgiven the Hebrew people over and over again, and delivered the people time and again. All along, God pursued Jonah with a persistent love, God pursued the Hebrew people with persistent love. But it was too much for Jonah to comprehend that God would also pursue the Ninevites with that same persistent love.

Could it be that we too suffer from the Jonah Syndrome? God has forgiven us much, God has given us second and third and seventy seventh chances, God has delivered us from the depths, (even if not from the belly of a big fish...) but we sure don't want to hear that God might pursue "those other people" with that same persistent love.

In the Jonah syndrome, we tend to think of "us" and "them", "insiders" and "outsiders." These days, many people are labeled and scorned as "outsiders": Muslims, or immigrants, or folks in the LGBTQ community, or people of color, or people with mental illness or addiction. In the Jonah syndrome, we divide people into categories, but that's not the way God operates. The book of Jonah ends with God's question to Jonah: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh?"

Several hundred years after Jonah lived, Jesus was born, to a family whose family tree included several "outsiders", foreigners who were hated by the Hebrew people. As an adult, Jesus challenged the common understandings of who is "in" and who is "out". He told a parable about the Good Samaritan, a foreigner, an "outsider", a hated enemy, who does the right thing when the "insiders" don't do the right thing. Jesus broke all the rules by having a conversation with the woman at the well, who was a foreigner, an outsider, a woman; he offered her living water as well as forgiveness. He healed a foreign leper along with 9 others, and that "outsider" was the only one of the 10 who returned to thank him. Jesus was criticized by the religious leaders of his day for welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners, all "outsiders". In all of these ways, Jesus challenged the Jonah syndrome head-on.

Just a few days ago, I came across this quote by a man named Hugh Hollowell: "Every time we use religion to draw a line to keep people out, Jesus is with the people on the other side of that line."

An Old Testament professor named Carol Bechtel wrote this at the end of a study on Jonah: "So I wonder, what would the church look like if we Christians learned the lessons that God tried so hard to teach Jonah? What would the world look like, for that matter? What would life look like if we left it up to God to decide who is "in" and who is "out"? What would it be like if we showed an ounce of compassion rather than a ton of judgment? What would it be like if we gave even the people who make us uncomfortable a second chance? What would it be like if we forgave as we have been forgiven?"

Let us pray. Teach us, gracious God, to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven. Open our minds and our hearts to those we may have shunned. Keep us in your loving care, and help us to love with reckless abandon. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."