

God of Mercy

sermon digest

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Jonah 3:4-10
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David Farmer, a well known and respected Baptist preacher was serving as pastor in New Orleans a couple of decades ago when a large evangelical denomination came to town for its annual convention with the intention of saving the city while it was there. Strolling down Bourbon Street during that time, Farmer was accosted by a young man who thrust an evangelistic tract in his face.

“What is this?” Farmer asked the young man.

“It’s a publication about God,” came the reply.

“Oh, I see. What will it tell me about God?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You haven’t read it?”

“No.”

“I’m sure it must tell me something about God’s love, don’t you think?”

“I doubt it,” the young man replied. “We want to keep you people from going to hell so it probably tells you about burning for eternity and stuff.”

“Let me be clear on this,” Farmer responded. “You care about my eternal destiny, and you don’t even know my name or what the tract says?”

“Look, mister, I have to pass all these out before I can meet my friends for Cajun food. You’d better get saved, or you’re going to hell; that’s all.”

“Jonah,” Farmer later observed, “did not even have as much motivation for his mission as did that young man.” The only pleasure he took in his mission to the Ninevites, Israel’s remembered enemies, was the warm feeling that came from pronouncing their impending doom—“and maybe,” Farmer speculates, the pleasure of Ninevah’s exotic food [Interpretation, 54, Ja 2000].

We often spend a good amount of time when we reflect on the story of Jonah in talking about Jonah himself. And we do have a good time. He is the perfect foil for any sermon. His provincialism, his petulance, his presumption in thinking that he can run away from God, his inescapable self-centeredness—all, as you may have noticed, make for great fun and great sermons.

Jonah, however, actually plays a bit part in his own story. The focus of the story—the focus of the parable, if you will—is not Jonah, but God. Despite all of Jonah’s antics, God throughout holds center stage. Every foolish thing Jonah says and does throws the spotlight on the character of God and the nature of God’s relationship to humanity.

We have spoken previously about the exaggerated terms in which the book of Jonah unfolds. Yvonne Sherwood sums it all up pretty well:

the adjective “big” (*gadol*) is added lavishly to almost every noun (the fish is big, the city is big, the wind is big); . . . a fish hears and responds to instruction; and verbs are stretched to excess (Yhwh does not send the storm but *hurls* it [1:4], the worm does not nibble at the plant but *smites* it [4:7])—the worm and the plant, like God and Jonah, are engaged in warfare and the reader can almost see the words “Pow,” “Biff,” and “Arghh” writ large over the text [A Biblical Text and Its Afterlife, 241; quoted by T. Fretheim, *Word & World*, Spr 2007].

So what about God in the story? What about the God who not only issues a call to Jonah, but instructs the fish and the wind and the plant and the worm to push Jonah in the directions he should go? Is God, after all, a manipulator against whom we don’t even have a chance? Is God, in the words of Terence Fretheim, “a micromanager of plants, fish, worms and sultry east winds”—and, yes, even us? [Word & World, Spr 2007, p. 127].

The God of great power is important to Jonah’s story. The story, however, goes to great lengths to say something more—something, if you will, that is directly contrary to such a surface reading.

God reserves the right to act in surprising ways. I recall many moons ago hearing in the seminary classroom a critical distinction between the God known to Israel and the gods of surrounding cultures. One of the benchmarks of Israel’s understanding of God was the characterization of God as a god who could be counted on to be dependably consistent. In contrast, the gods of Israel’s neighbors were often depicted as capricious, toying with the lives and emotions of their subjects and leaving them in abject fear, lest they misread the gods’ bidding and bring anger and wrath upon their heads. Israel’s God was a God of covenant—a God who not only lay down specific expectations, but a God who could be trusted to keep promises. Israel’s God, the God of Hebrew scriptures, was unchanging in terms of being wholly righteousness and demanding righteousness. “I am the Lord your God,” Ten Commandments begin; *therefore* “you shall. . .” (Ex. 19:20:2). And, as the Holiness Code of Leviticus puts it, “I am holy;” *therefore*, “you shall be holy” (11:44 & 45).

Just as God’s righteousness and demands for righteousness could be counted on, however, God clearly reserved the right to change courses of action. God reserved the right to forgive. A defining moment in Israel’s early journey with God is played out in the story of the exodus. Ready to consume the people for constructing a Baal in the wilderness, God heeds Moses’ reminder of God’s special relationship with this people; and “the LORD changed his mind” (Ex. 32:14) or, as the King James Version puts it, “the LORD repented.”

God, responding to the sorrow of the Ninevites in Jonah, also repents; and on twenty-eight other occasions in

addition to these two, the Bible speaks of God's repenting or changing God's mind. It was not a new, but a basic tenet of Israel's faith. God's freedom to change course in pursuit of God's good purposes was within God's prerogative. God's readiness to respond to Israel's own repentance was critically important; and God's own self-description in the wilderness were a source of great comfort: "[I am] the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Ex. 34:6-7). Why, then, does God's repentance so trouble Jonah?

God's justice is informed by God's mercy. Could it be that the storyteller was speaking less about a man named Jonah than about a people tempted to play Jonah in their relationships with their neighbors? We tend to numbly read the Bible in a monotone. In doing so, we often miss strong indications that some portions are written to contrast sharply with another. Consider that right after the book of Jonah, Nahum exults, "A jealous and avenging God is the LORD, the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies" (1:2). Acknowledging that "the LORD is slow to anger," Nahum quickly moves on to assert that "the LORD will by no means clear the guilty" and closes with the sweet strains of celebration at the utter destruction of the Ninevites: "your wound is mortal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands" (3:19).

Nahum was written close to the time when Ninevah was actually destroyed (about 612 B.C.E.); Jonah, a century or more later. Yet, even given the separation of time, Jonah is depicted as being totally unable to imagine that the quality of mercy Israel so valued in the God of covenant could possibly extend to, much less change, the despised Ninevites, even upon their supposed repentance. A people who had for so long inflicted suffering upon Israel and her neighbors was beyond repentance, beyond the grace of God.

Jonah's theology and the theology threatening dominance in the post-exilic era in which Jonah's story was told was circulated reflected the theology of Job's caring, but overly certain friends. Jonah, and therefore, seemingly God desired a pound of flesh, not the sacrifice of repentance. Jonah knew what justice meant, and it did not entail forgiveness—at least not for the enemy. In the words of Terence Fretheim:

Jonah's justice is strict and precise, almost mechanical. You reap what you sow, period! Jonah knows that God is merciful and gracious, but believes that those divine characteristics can obscure God's role as executor of justice on the deserving wicked. Jonah will now be more just than God is! [Ibid, 139].

And isn't it interesting? At the very moment he desires retribution for the Ninevites, he fails to see that if God were to follow the retributive system he espouses, Jonah would himself be a recipient of God's wrath.

The issue in Jonah's story is not whether God has power. The issue is why God does not make full use of that power to secure justice, end suffering and put evil forces to flight. If we are honest, that is also our struggle. Shaken again by another terrible onslaught of nature, we wonder at a God of power who does not use that power to stay the rumble of an earthquake that will take yet again an untold number of innocent lives. Saddened every day when we sit down to watch the evening news at the evil that grips human hearts and results in rampant crime, self-centered greed, warfare and human want, we wonder why a God of power doesn't step in and put evil people in their places.

Despite some early evidences in Hebrew theology to the contrary, however, God is not a micro-manager. We find ourselves more at home with the people who endured the searing and unending questions of suffering and injustice that thrust themselves upon them in the experience and aftermath of the exile. Like them, we live in the midst of our questions and frustrations, struggling with the freedom and responsibility of what it means to walk with a God of mercy. Generation after generation and day after day, God does not lift the weight of responsibility from us but places upon us the task of converting enemies into fellow servants of a loving and just God. Jesus and later Paul, if you remember, said something of the same thing.

Naive, isn't it? Or is it?