

+ Jonah 3:3-4:11 + Should I Not Be Concerned? + 6th Sunday after Pentecost + 5 July 2015 +

Sometimes you just want to run away. There are some tasks to be done or conversations to be had that you don't want to do. It's going to be uncomfortable. It might be painful—physically or emotionally. It might be difficult. So you try to avoid it. You deny the problem. You'd rather run away, but the elephant is reminding you that it's still in the room.

You have to do that task. You have to have that conversation. You have to do it because it needs to be done. It's the only way the project will keep going. It's the only way that you and others will have relief or peace or calm. You have to do it for the good of that individual or that family or that group. The necessary change that needs to happen can only happen if you do it.

I'm sure you can think of conversations or situations where you've felt like that. We all have. Perhaps you need to have a conversation with someone and you've been avoiding it. Perhaps you're in a situation where necessary change needs to happen for your good and the good of others.

Do you ever feel that way when it comes to sharing the Word of God with someone—a loved one, a friend, a neighbor? Do you ever feel that way knowing that God expects you to speak the truth in love with gentleness and respect? While actually speaking what you know about Jesus and God's Word may seem easy on the outside, it's not necessarily easy on the inside. You might feel uncomfortable sharing God's Word. You might feel like you'd be going out on a limb with your friendship or relationship if you tried to talk to someone about Jesus and what God's Word says. You might have a chilling sense of fear that your friend, your loved one might reject you. On the other hand, you might be more inclined to blast away at a person or say nothing at all rather than call them to repent by speaking God's truth in love with gentleness and respect. Sometimes you'd rather just run away.

That's how the Old Testament prophet Jonah felt when God commissioned him with an uncomfortable, difficult task for a native Israelite. God wanted Jonah to go the great city of Nineveh whose metro area likely had as many people as Onondaga County and whose people were the hated enemies of Israel. God wanted Jonah to go there and call that city to repent—to turn from their wickedness and live or fall under God's judgment.

Jonah didn't want to go. He didn't want the Ninevites to repent and perhaps be rescued. He wanted the holy God to destroy Israel's enemy, but he knew that God was a compassionate and gracious God who cared about every soul—even those of the Ninevites. So Jonah ran. He hopped aboard a merchant ship headed for Tarshish—basically as far away from Nineveh as one could go at that time, but Jonah couldn't run from God.

During a furious storm, it became clear that God was coming after Jonah. After Jonah was thrown into the sea, the Lord of grace provided his reluctant prophet with rescue by way of an enormous fish that swallowed him. In the belly of that fish, Jonah himself repented and praised the Lord with humble thanksgiving. Three days later the fish spat Jonah out on dry land and the Lord sent his prophet to Nineveh once again. This time Jonah went and obeyed the Lord proclaiming a simple message of repentance, ***“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”***

Amazingly, the entire city of Nineveh listened to Jonah's message and repented. In humility, ***“they declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth”***—a rough material symbolizing grief over their sins as the people sat in the dust. Even the king did it and he sent out a decree stating, ***“Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”*** God did relent and did withhold his destruction from them.

So how do you think Jonah reacted? Having experienced God's compassion and mercy on the high seas, you'd expect him to rejoice that this mighty city of people had repented before the Lord, but there was no joy in Jonah's heart. Instead a burning anger welled up there. He angrily prayed to the Lord of grace, ***“O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”*** How quickly he had forgotten how God had rescued him and now he was angry with God's mercy. Jonah would rather die than see those people repent. God's answer was simple. ***“Have you any right to be angry?”***

If the Lord of grace wasn't going to take his life, then Jonah figured he might as well find a comfortable place to see what kind of fireworks of destruction God would pour out on Nineveh. It was hot and sunny, so Jonah

made a shelter, but as the day wore on with no destruction, Jonah started feeling uncomfortable. So the Lord in his grace caused a plant to grow over Jonah's head to provide him shade and **"Jonah was very happy."**

Yet this was more than a source of pleasing shade for Jonah. The Lord of grace had an object lesson for his angry prophet. At dawn the next day God provided a worm that quickly chewed the vine until it withered in the heat.

Then God turned the heat up by providing a scorching east wind under a blazing sun. So Jonah got angry at God again. **"It would be better for me to die than to live."** **"Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"** God asked. **"I do...I am angry enough to die."** Rather than take his life as Jonah wished, the Lord opened his eyes to his grace. **"You've been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. But Nineveh has more than a 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"** "If you're that concerned about a vine, shouldn't I be concerned about each and every soul from infant to elderly in that city?"

Now do you see yourself in Jonah? Are you ever like that reluctant, angry prophet? Do you ever find yourself trying to run away from the opportunity that God gives you to speak his truth in love to a friend, a loved one, or someone else? Do you ever hesitate like Jonah did because deep down you know that God is gracious and compassionate, but you don't want someone or some group of people to repent and live? Would you rather that that person or family that you don't like goes to hell or that group of people that make you uncomfortable or anyone that you think is not deserving of God's grace by your standards? Do you ever forget how the Lord graciously rescued you with his own compassionate mercy, how he relented from destroying you with his righteous judgment as your own sins deserve?

Do you and I have any right to think like that—to see people as anything less than blood-bought souls for whom Christ died? Do you and I have any right to be angry or disappointed when God relents and forgives showing his compassion to those whom you think do not deserve such mercy? No.

We care so much about ourselves and what makes us comfortable and what's easy for us to do that we forget that God's compassionate love and mercy are for everyone. We forget that God's compassionate love rescued each of us from an eternity of darkness and separation from his love.

God's question to Jonah at the end of the book pierces our hearts too. **"Should I not be concerned about that great city?"** Yes, I have been like Jonah. I have run away from what I thought was difficult and failed to speak the truth in love with gentleness and respect. I have hesitated to speak because someone was not like me or those around me. I have forgotten that my Savior-God is a compassionate and merciful God, who relents because he took on himself the punishment that I deserve. I have no right to be angry or withhold God's love and grace and good news of the Savior who sets us free from sin and guilt and death. I have been like Jonah—and so have you.

Yet like undeserving Jonah and all those people of Nineveh, you and I have been forgiven. You and I are blood-bought souls for whom Christ died. You and I are covered with the holy blood of Christ and for that reason God relents from his holy judgment. God relents from destroying us as our sins deserve. God relents from striking us dead and instead enables us to live. God relents because Jesus suffered that holy judgment in our place.

God's compassionate mercy through an enormous fish moved Jonah to obey the word of the Lord and take his message to a hostile city that desperately needed it. God's compassionate mercy through Christ moves you and me to obey the word of the Lord and take his message to those who desperately need to hear it from us. God's compassionate mercy moves you to finally have that difficult conversation, to make that call to repentance and forgiveness through Jesus with that friend, that loved one, that neighbor. God's compassionate mercy moves you to cross that bridge of that friendship or relationship to speak the truth in love with gentleness and respect to that person or that couple or that family who matter so much to you. God's compassionate mercy gives you the strength to face the possibility of being rejected knowing that you have what can save them.

God's compassionate mercy keeps you from running away, from hesitating, from denying that the conversation needs to be had, and it compels you to go. Because of Jesus, God relents and sets us free. That's our message. That's our motivation, and that's our concern for every single soul. May the Lord bless you as you share his Word with those you know and love. Amen.