

Jonah: Part 4**October 22, 2017**

Are you controlling your anger...? or is your anger controlling you?

During the month of October we've been working our way through the epic story of Jonah.

And we have been thinking about how Stories shape us, how they help us understand who we are, where we've been, and the kind of people we were meant to be.

Some of my favorite memories as a child are of my grandma Millie reading various stories to me.....from Mike Mulligan his steam shovel to stories from the Bible.....and growing up, whether it was at church, or thorough my grandma or through the storybook Bible that I had, ...I remember really enjoying the story of Jonah....

I loved the fish, I loved that God gave him a second chance to go to Nineveh, and I loved that Jonah said yes to that second chance. But when I was young, I thought the story of Jonah stopped there.

I thought the story was that Jonah runs away from God's mission for him.... Jonah gets swallowed by a fish, Jonah gets vomited out..... Jonah listens to God and tells the Ninevites the message and everyone lives happily ever after.....

But as we have heard this morning, that's not how Jonah ends.

Whereas nearly every single kid's version of the story of Jonah concludes with Jonah being the hero, it turns out that this just isn't the case.

Jonah isn't the hero of this story.

And we discover all along that this story is not just about the fish, it's not just about Jonah.... this story is about you and me and how God's grace radically changes our lives.

The tale of Jonah ends with a question from God....God asks “*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?*” (Jonah 4: 11 NIV).

That question isn't just for a question to Jonah, it's a question to you and to me....

It is a question that leads us to yet another question: Are we willing to share God's grace, not merely with the people we think that deserve grace or even with the people we like, but are we willing to share God's grace with our enemies?

We discover that God's grace is not logical, it isn't easy and it comes at a cost. God's grace changes things, it changes how we see, how we love, and how we share.

It transforms the way we are supposed to use our anger....

Last week, we discovered that in many ways, Jonah has just been the most successful and effective prophet in all of Israel's history. He has told the Ninevites that they've got forty days to turn their lives around, to live differently or God's going to destroy them.

And where many other prophets take chapters to convey their messages, Jonah does it in just 8 words....and to everyone's surprise the entire city, from the king to the animals responds to this message....they stop eating and pray to God asking for mercy. Talk about a win for Jonah.

This isn't just a One or two hundred people.... This is an entire city, more than 120,000 individuals moved by God's message that he shared with them!

I don't know about you, but if I went out and preached to 120,000 people and they were all moved and it changed their lives, I would be in a pretty good mood!

One would think that Jonah would be excited by his success, but he isn't.....

Because Jonah hates the Ninevites. They are the enemy...they are the ones that persecuted and threatened the Hebrews....when this story was written...the Assyrian Empire which Nineveh was the capital of gone through and wiped out most of Israel....

When you think about it from that point of view and judge it by our standards.... Jonah has every right to be angry with these people....

But the Lord comes to Jonah and God asks Jonah another simple yet at the same time an extremely complex question, God asks: *"Is it right for you to be angry?"*

And I find that this is the very question I might need to ask myself a little more often....how about you?

I believe that the first people to tell and write down the story of Jonah wanted us to use it like a mirror; they wanted us to hold it up until we see ourselves in it.

It is so easy for us to write people off whether they meant to hurt us or it was just a mistake.....I wish it wasn't true, but all I have to do is to think about my experience in elementary school and Junior High School to remember how easy it is to HATE the people that harmed me...

Did you have a nickname in middle school? Did you ever give someone else a nick name?

I had all kinds of nick names in school.....From Luke the Puke.....to Luke Warm Ham.....and I'll never forget when I was in 6th grade and an older kid called me a racist slur referring to people who are from the Middle East....a term I had never heard before....and I remember the

horror and hatred I felt when someone explained to me what the term meant....and then after the horror passed, I remember being overwhelmed with confusion because I'm not even of Middle Eastern decent....

Yes, All I have to do is to think about those nicknames and the cruelty associated with them and I realize human beings are capable of being so hurtful to one another!

We, like Jonah sometimes really struggle to love people, at least to love people the way that God loves people.

As we talked about a few weeks ago, Jonah sees the Ninevites as enemies! He hates them.

And Jonah believes that the only people who matter are God's people... Nobody else!

Jonah believes that God's people, the Israelites are a chosen nation, and he wants to use that sense of nationalism against his enemies.....

Maybe for quasi-admirable reasons.... After all, the Ninevites are the people who have destroyed 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel, these are the people who have terrorized the nations surrounding the remaining tribes with violence, genocide and unspeakable crimes against humanity. They are the bad guys!

And we know what we like to see happen to bad guys...whether it is in a Clint Eastwood western or a Star Wars film.....

The bad guy should never win and they deserve to be punished for their crimes.....

That's all that Jonah wants. He wants the Ninevites to get what they deserve. Judgment, punishment, death-...justice, Jonah wants justice.

He sees the violence, he sees the pain, and he says to God, I want you to make this right!

Who can blame him? When I look throughout the world, I can find plenty of Nineveh's. Plenty of people you and I love to hate.... terrorists, militants, people involved in human trafficking.... leaders of other nations promising to turn the beautiful place that we live into a sea of fire with their Nuclear arsenals.....

Those people are my Ninevites!

Who are your Nievehites???

Who is it that when you think about who they are or what they've done there is an anger that swells within you?

Do you control that anger, or does that anger control you?

I am always amazed at how easy it is to lose control when I feel my family is threatened..... For the last two weeks, my wife Stephanie and I have been struggling with the County office of Education...as they lose paperwork, forget to record the proper signatures or go back on the promises that they had made us earlier.....and all of these mistakes result in the delay of vital speech therapy that our son, Caleb needs.....

Just thinking about it makes my whole body shake with anger. ...I want to have people get reprimanded or lose their jobs if they don't perform perfectly for the needs of my child..... I want them to get punished for their mistakes... I want payback for what I perceive has their incompetence... my anger and frustration have been controlling me....

And that's Jonah. When Jonah saw what God did for the Ninevites...that even after all of their wrongdoing they were let off the hook..... he became angry!

For Jonah it was wrong! It was evil!

So wrong that Jonah is ashamed to be any part of it....he even asks the Lord to take his life.....

During week two of this series, we talked about how it seemed Jonah learned this lesson in the belly of that big fish...but now his anger has brought him to the place of despair all over again....

Uncontrollable Anger can totally wreck our lives...

We want God to be on our side, to fight for what we are fighting for! Jonah's so mad at God that he says, *"if this is how it's going to be, if my life, my career, my purpose is to speak for you, well just finish me off now because I'm done! I'm done with you God!"*

You can almost see him on the ground kicking his feet and pounding his hands on the dirt....

And Jonah's poor behavior doesn't stop there, even though God told him that Nineveh would be spared, Jonah still hikes outside the city to find himself the best possible spot to watch in the hope that Nineveh will still be destroyed.

Why? Because Jonah believed he could manipulate God into doing what he wanted God to do. *"Your Israel's God, you fight for us, you know what the Assyrians have done and what they are capable of doing."*

Jonah's established the barriers, put up the boundaries, and said, *"God fit into the mold I tell you to...."*

We love it when God fits into the lines we draw...but as we have seen over and over again in this short story, the author wants us to clearly understand that God's grace breaks down our barriers, boundaries and boxes.

So there Jonah is overlooking the city, expecting fireworks....

He wants to see fire reign down from heaven and destroy this city...

But the interesting thing is....that Even though Jonah is so angry at God...and wants to control God.... God doesn't give up on him.

No, God gives Jonah another gift, a gift of grace...God gives him shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant that grew up behind him...

Even though Jonah doesn't get it, even though Jonah is throwing a fit, God still provides Jonah with a gift. A gift which makes Jonah happy! It's as if Jonah sees this plant as a sign of God's favor. Finally God's on my side! Now he's comfortable as he is anticipating the destruction of Nineveh!

But it doesn't last long. Quickly the plant withers and dies, and Jonah gets hotter and hotter and not just from the scorching sun, he is burning up from the inside out!

Jonah's angry....so angry that he again declares, "*It would be better for me to die than to live.*"

Make no mistake, the author is trying to tell us something by having this chapter echo itself....

And in a similar way as before....God says to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

And as it turns out, Jonah is more upset about the death of this plant than the entire city of Nineveh. And thus...the magnitude of his uncontrollable and misplaced anger is revealed....

One of the things Jonah refuses to understand is that just as it is important to accept God's grace and forgiveness in our lives....it is also equally important to pass that grace onto others....

We can't let anger be the thing that dictates how we are going to share God's grace with others.

A couple weeks ago, we mourned and lamented what happened in Las Vegas during a country music festival....It was another chapter in a line of mass gun violence that has been occurring in the United States longer than we really want to accept....

You may recall another violent gun-related incident that happened in Nickel Mines Pennsylvania back in 2006... On a Monday morning a man walked into an Amish school house with a handgun, he asked all the boys to leave and held 10 girls hostage until he decided to opened fire.....and although it would seem that this was just another one of our Nations tragedies, the response from the Amish community was different than we had ever seen before....

Instead of only demanding justice, instead of only placing blame, instead of a call to arm teachers or the picketing of the NRA, the Amish community in Nickel Mines focused on forgiveness.

Immediately the Amish community forgave the gunman, Charles Richards and embraced his family. Their forgiveness was so real, so pervasive that it was shocking!

In fact, in this incident there was even story of a grandfather standing near the body of his 13-year-old granddaughter and He turned to the boys that surrounded him and said, "We must not think evil of this man!"

The entire nation stood back and watched as these people focused on grace. Something that was core to their DNA. It was who they were. How do did they do that? How can we do that? How do we become that kind of community???

No, it's not logical, it isn't easy, and it certainly comes at a cost.

But this text that we hold sacred is teaching us that we need to extend grace even to the Ninevites in our lives....

Who is your Nineveh?

They don't have to live halfway across the world, they don't even have to be in a different city.....sometimes are Nineveh's are closer to home than we care to admit.

We, like Jonah want justice.....

But what if true justice isn't about retribution...what if it isn't about our advisors getting what they deserve...?

As Gandhi once said... *"if we live by this 'eye for an eye' mentality.... we will all end up blind...."*

Maybe it is time for us to re-imagine what justice looks like...

Professor and Philosopher Cornel West has a great re-imagining of the word Justice....he says that "Justice is what love looks like in public."

And while this is such a new way of looking at things...it also is a 2,000-year-old way of looking at it too.... a way as old as the cross.

Jonah's story....and the story of Jesus both show us that the way forward is not easy....

In fact, these stories highlight that the easy way out is for us to hate our enemies....the easy way out is to make excuses about why they should pay for what they have done....the easy way out is to be consumed and controlled by our anger....

The easy way is fitting God into the mold we think God should fit into...

But the ultimate reality of the story we have been exploring this month is that God goes well beyond anything we can imagine...God's love breaks barriers....it jumps right over the lines we attempt to draw....

Don't get me wrong...there are times where righteous anger is needed.... We this when Jesus flipped over the tables of the money-changers in the temple..... But we cannot let our anger control us permanently.....we can't let our anger become focused on the individual over the sin....

In my family's situation of navigating our overly-complex and inefficient early childhood education system, I can and should use the anger I am experiencing to fight for a better system....I can and should

use it as motivation to call our Board of Education to a higher standard....I can use that righteous anger to give a voice to ALL those families who are being overlooked by the system.....but the second that anger is focused against individuals who are just doing their best to do their job....rather than the real issue....rather than the sin of not providing our children with the resources they need....I have missed the mark...

The moment that anger isn't rooted in hope for a better world and love for my enemies....I have lost everything....

Is your anger controlling you....or are you controlling your anger...

We are all Jonah's at one time or another.... so incredibly lost and stubborn, stuck in our narrow ways.... But for Jonah's like us, there is always hope....because that same Grace God showed to the prophet...and showed to Nineveh...and then had to show to the prophet again..... God shows us that same grace through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ....

May we find joy in God's grace for all people and not let anger control our lives....

Amen...