



“Longing for God”

Text: Jonah 3:10-4:11

*a sermon by the Rev. Molly De Witt
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We have this great tradition in our Senior High camp at Pyoca. I'm not sure how long it has been happening, but every night after our all-camp activity and snack, our high school campers come together as a group for an activity called “Relationship Rap.” Just by the name it sounds thrilling, I know. Relationship Rap provides a space for campers to ask tough questions about life and faith, and get real life answers from their counselors and their peers.

We give our high school campers the opportunity to ask any question to the group, and I mean anything. They submit their questions throughout the day by placing them in the Relationship Rap box. It doesn't matter how silly or outrageous the question may be. The questions are reviewed by our Senior High volunteer coordinators and presented to the group each night. Then the group as a whole gets to answer, and sometimes debate, the question. Questions range from “*Is water actually wet?*” to “*Am I a bad Christian because I don't like going to church?*”

And I forgot to mention, this is 45 high school students wrestling with these tough questions, with a bit of guidance from adult mentors. It's amazing to watch. The adults, unless asked, don't really contribute all that much. Sure, I've been there to help guide some theological questions and provide a Presbyterian perspective when asked, but we lay out the space to be open, so that the youth can work out what they believe and why they believe it in a safe space among their peers.

Do you believe we have many spaces like that today in our adult world? Ones that are free to express our feelings and beliefs, without the judgment or chastisement of others? Is there anywhere we feel safe enough?

This summer's camp theme was *This is Our Prayer*,¹ and each daily theme focused on a different prayer practice. Today's text from Jonah 4 comes from Day 3 of our curriculum. Each day viewed prayer as a means of “Longing for God” and communicating with our Creator. This particular day's theme from the book of Jonah is *Longing to Be Heard*, and I can't help but wonder, who are we talking about: God or Jonah?

We come upon Jonah at the end of his story, which is an interesting one from a biblical perspective. Every other book of the twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament is a prophetic oracle, bits of prophecy revealed by God that comes right out of the mouths of various prophets. Not Jonah. Jonah is the *story* of a prophet, and we don't see Jonah prophesying like his contemporaries. What we do see him doing is running, pouting, and becoming incredibly emotional.

It's hard to place the book of Jonah. There is no particular era in history where scholars agree that it falls. Since it is more of a story than a book of prophecy, a lot of people don't really know what to do with it. In many ways, it reads like a parable. And much like Jesus' parables, there are a lot of ways we can interpret this story. So what is the meaning we are supposed to be taking away from Jonah?

I'll reveal my bias to you. As with any reading of the Bible, I tend to interpret the Word differently based on where I'm at in my life. The story of Jonah told to me as a child was a wild tale about a man who got scared, ran away, was swallowed by a fish, yet inevitably returned to do what God asked of him. But now as an adult who finally went back and finished reading the story of Jonah to the very end, I find the way he interacts with God to be a bit shocking.

It's not like other prophets haven't shocked me before, or continue to shock me. The prophet Hosea tells us he marries a prostitute, then berates her and his people, just to make an example of Israel.

I struggle with a lot of our prophets, because many are incredibly flawed people that God is somehow still able to use in order to do God's work in the world. And yet, they are people in positions of power, flawed though they may be, and I believe God is calling them to be better, rather than excused for their poor behavior. What we see in their relationship with God is what I would call righteous accountability. They are not held above the people that they serve, rather they are called to live just as righteously as those that they prophesy to.

Jonah is no exception. At this point in Scripture we find out that Jonah is mad. And I don't mean frustrated a bit, he is what I would call livid. This I find interesting in and of itself, because many of our biblical books do not prescribe emotions to their characters.

The Hebrew in Jonah chapter 4, verse 1 is roughly, "*it was evil to Jonah and it burned him.*"² What a wimpy translation into English "*this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry.*"³ No. "It was evil to Jonah and it burned him." Seems kind of rough to translate that Jonah saw God's actions to be evil.

Let's backtrack a bit. What could God have done to make Jonah so mad? The part of the story we all remember, Jonah getting swallowed by a whale and vomited back out, was because he ran away from God's command to preach and prophesy to the people of Nineveh. The Ninevites, for reasons not elaborated upon, were seen as wicked. Jonah was called to go to them, tell them to repent, or they would feel the greatest wrath from God.

So Jonah, after running away and taking his sweet ol' time, does this. He goes to Nineveh and prophesies. And what do we see? Likely the greatest mass conversion of people AND animals in the entire Bible. The entire city, 120,000 people AND their animals (I think that's added for dramatic effect), repented. They turned around. Their lives changed. So what does God do? Instead of the wrath that Jonah had been told to prophesy, God spares the city.

And this, THIS is what infuriates Jonah. He is so mad that he is *burning* and sees this act of redemption as evil. God shows mercy and compassion upon

those who do right, and Jonah is livid. Jonah and God go through a tense conversation over the next few verses.

Jonah is so upset he tells God it would be better to die than to live. He throws back a famous line that is reiterated throughout the Old Testament, that God is “*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,*” almost in a way that seems sarcastic.⁴ He is burning with anger after all. Again, I think this story has a penchant for the dramatic. God responds, “*Is it right for you to be angry?*”, or literally in Hebrew, “*is it good it burns you?*”

Jonah doesn't respond. He heads out of the city and builds himself a booth to sit under while he waits to see what will happen to Nineveh. Booths like the one Jonah sat under were a means of protection against the elements. They often had roofs made from leaves or organic matter. Knowing that he has a means of protection outside of the city walls, I think what happens next is even more interesting, as well as a bit comical and dramatic.

God appoints a bush to grow over Jonah. Mind you, he already has the booth as a means of protection from the elements. The bush grows so large that it provides extra shade for Jonah. He's quite happy about the relief he receives from it. It's the first time Jonah is happy in the entire story. The bush lives for one day before God has a worm attack the bush, and it dies. Jonah now has to deal with the hot sun beating down upon him. He becomes faint, perhaps from dehydration, and tells God again, “*it is better for me to die than live.*”

God hits right back, “*is it right for you to be angry about the bush?*,” or literally, “*is it good it burns you about the bush?*” And Jonah, in all of his inner turmoil responds, “*yes, angry enough to die.*”

Now, I want to pause in this part of the story, because this is the very last thing we hear from Jonah. Jonah is so angry about what God has done, saving the Ninevites, that he is willing to sit outside the city walls staring at the city until God does what he wants. And when he realizes God is not going to destroy the city, he asks for destruction upon himself.

God did not tell Jonah to go sit outside the city. God did not tell him to build the booth. This is the first time God has not requested anything from Jonah. Jonah has done his part in the story from God's perspective, and yet Jonah does not like the end result. He doesn't have to sit outside the city boiling under the sun until he faints. He chose that.

There is something deep within me that wants to know why Jonah is so angry. Is his anger against God justified? Perhaps it could be. He wouldn't be the first person ever to be mad at God. Some people want to interpret Jonah seeking biblical justice against the city, which God chooses not to enact, but there is no mention of justice here. We know that Nineveh had a bad reputation, but aren't told why.

Perhaps Jonah has a personal axe to grind that he thought would win out. I wonder, as a Hebrew man, if he thought that God would inevitably side with him as one of God's chosen people. One man over 120,000.

I see so many parallels within the book of Jonah to life today. We're the most divided that we've ever been, not just in the US, but around the world. The divide is so deep that it has pitted Christian against Christian, many choosing to believe that God is truly on their side over that of another believer. Some days feel hopeless, as if the world has given up on redemption or reconciliation with the other.

I think at times we've all got a little of Jonah in us, believing if we follow God's commands that inevitably the result will benefit us.

The last thing we hear from the entire book is from God. God says to Jonah, “ *You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow...and should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?* ”

Who in today’s world is allowed to long for God? Like Jonah, have we decided for ourselves whom God has chosen? If so, where does redemption and reconciliation lie with others who seem to be so different from us? Where does it lie for those who profess to believe in the same God as us, and yet live out that belief so differently? Is it our understanding of redemption that gets the last word, or is it God’s?

I shared the story of our Sr. High campers because, in addition to teaching them about God, we are also teaching them about living in a world that doesn’t always see eye to eye on our beliefs. We are teaching them to hold space for others who experience life, faith, and the living God in different ways each and every day. We are teaching them compassion, love, justice, and mercy as they sit across from each other sharing their beliefs in a holy space, some of which do not always align with their peers. We are teaching them that each one of them longs for God and meets God from where they are at. And God is always willing to meet them there, ready to provide mercy when we least expect it.

In this holy tension we find what true reconciliation and redemption looks like. We can come together with all of our deepest feelings, be they anger, hurt, love, fear, or worry, and others can hold those feelings with us.

We don’t hear a response from Jonah. After God says the last word, we do not know if Jonah’s heart changed. We do not know if he got up from that booth ready to move on and do God’s work in the world, or if he continued to sit there ready to die.

God is not saying “don’t be angry” to Jonah, merely is it good or right? Are we to fester in our anger, disappointment, and bitterness as we watch others become transformed by God, and maybe it doesn’t fit what we think it should?

As others are transformed, where is God asking us what is right for our own lives? Where is God pushing us, like Jonah, to be transformed? Is there a space where we can let go of the wrongs that may haunt us and weigh down our hearts?

So who is longing to be heard? I think both God and Jonah. Our God is such that we can come to our Creator with the roughest versions of ourselves, our worst days, even our jealous and vengeful days, and God is ready and waiting to come and meet us with open arms. God is ready for us and those that we clash with; mercy and grace wide open to both parties.

Are we ready, after our prayers of need and frustration, are we ready for prayers of transformation? Are we ready, unlike Jonah, to pray for our hearts to be transformed as much as we are willing to ask God to transform the hearts of others?

Imagine God pulling you to work toward the transformation and reconciliation of the world, with your own transformation at the front of the line. Where is your part in that? Amen.

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1. InsideOut Christian Resources for Outdoor Ministries, *This Is Our Prayer*, Summer Camp Curriculum: 2020, <https://insideoutcurriculum.com/>.
 2. The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. VII, *Jonah*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 517.
 3. New Revised Standard Version, Jonah 4:1.
 4. Ibid, 518.