

Is This the Best God Can Do? Jonah 3:10-4:11 1/16/22

We began a two-part series on the book of Jonah last week which we'll finish up this morning. I was looking for a fun way to recap the first part of the book and I remembered a song I wrote many years ago about Jonah. I've already sung it here once, but frankly, it didn't go all that well. Some people apparently thought it was below the dignity of the office of pastor. I don't think anyone left the church over it, but I'm not positive about that. Oh yeah, and Bonnie begged me not to sing it. But, then I thought, "Hey, I'm retiring in about six weeks. What are they going to do to me?" So, here it is. If you're a person who is easily offended, you may want to turn the sound off... And the chair of the Worship Committee is Mary Flinner, if you want to complain. (Lyrics follow)

Once there lived a man in the country

He was a man of God and he liked to pray

One time he was talking to the Lord at night

And he heard the Lord God say,

Jonah, to Nineveh

This is where I want you to go

The people there are evil, but I love them so,

But Jonah said, "I won't go!"

But God loved the people more than Jonah's cry,

So he prepared for him a monster fish.

And since Jonah was a-runnin' from the will of God

He found himself a one-course dish

Well, Jonah thought about his condition

In that awful mess for almost three days

Finally, he surrendered to the Lord in full

And lifted up his voice in praise

I'll go... to Nineveh

Anywhere you want me to go

I'll change my plans around so I can do your will

And God said, "Then I'll let you go."

The moral of the story is quite simple, friends,

More simple than you'll often wish.

You'd better keep within the perfect will of God,

Or stay away from hungry fish!

Well, you can't say you weren't warned! Jonah eventually ends up in Nineveh, and God uses his message. The people of Nineveh repent from their violence and evil, and God relents from punishing them! Then things get weird. *¹⁰When 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.*

⁴But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He 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. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 3:10-4:4)

Well, that's unexpected! We learn a good bit about God's character and Jonah's character here. God would rather forgive than destroy, and he is very patient, both with the Ninevites as well as with Jonah. On the other

hand, Jonah wants judgment to come raining down on those awful Ninevites. After all, they have done all kinds of evil and violence against the surrounding kingdoms. They don't deserve God's mercy! He basically accuses God of being too soft on sin. Jonah doesn't want to live in a world where bad things go unpunished. It's too confusing and unfair.

Perhaps he would have joined the "I Wish I'd Never Been Born" movement which began a few years ago. One of these anti-natalists in India actually sued his parents for giving birth to him, claiming that he never asked to be born, and that life is meaningless! That sounds a lot like Jonah, doesn't it? He has forgotten how grateful he was to God in chapter 2 for saving his life. Perhaps his erratic mood swings are a symptom of PTSD. After all, he's been through a lot recently.

By the way, I love God's simple question at the end of Jonah's tirade. "Is it right for you to be angry?" Let's finish the story. ⁵*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.* ⁶*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.* ⁷*But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.* ⁸*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."⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die."¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night."¹¹ 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?" (Jonah 4:5-11)

God performs a kind of parable for Jonah, providing shade for him from the hot, Mediterranean sun with a rapidly-growing plant, and then taking the plant away. Jonah's default response is anger, once again! Oh yeah, and he still wants to die! God tells him that if he is concerned about the loss of a single plant, for which he had done nothing, how much more should God care about 100,000 Ninevites, whom he describes as not knowing their right hand from their left. In other words, they are lost, having never received the revelation of who their Creator is, and therefore who they are. And, did you notice, God also loves their animals! Nice touch!

So, the main point of the story is clear. God loves all people, not just Israel. And God will go to great lengths to save people. But the story raises a question for me. Is Jonah really the best representative that God

could find in all of Israel? This bigoted, disobedient, hard-hearted diva? Really?

Then I thought about some of the other characters in the Bible that God chose to carry out his work who aren't much better. Abraham and Sarah, the ancestors of all Jewish people, doubted God's promise to them, and later Abraham lied and told Pharaoh that Sarah wasn't his wife, because he was afraid Pharaoh would kill him in order to take Sarah into his harem! Not exactly an officer and a gentleman, was he?

Or, how about Jacob, another great ancestor of Israel, who duped his dying father in order to cheat his brother out of his inheritance and blessing. Or, Moses, who God chose to lead the Hebrews out of Egyptian slavery and to whom God revealed his law. He was a murderer! Don't stop there. Rahab, who helped the Hebrews take the city of Jericho, was a prostitute. King David, called a man after God's own heart, committed adultery with Bathsheba, had her husband killed to cover it up, and had many of his rivals to the throne killed. Most other Israelite kings weren't much better. The New Testament brings us Peter, a loose cannon who abandoned Jesus when he was most in need, and Paul, who oversaw the stoning of an innocent follower of Jesus named Stephen. Is this the best God can do? What's the deal here?

First, if the story of Jonah tells us anything, it tells us that discerning what God is up to and why God does what he does is often beyond us! We just don't know enough to make judgments about God's actions. Second, God's willingness to use people like Jonah and all the others demonstrates that God is a God of second chances. And that is good news, for it means that no matter what you've done, God isn't finished with you yet, and is willing to forgive whatever you've done. And God's use of questionable characters reminds us that God has the power to transform us, to transform anyone!

In the movie, "Seabiscuit," millionaire Charles Howard interviews a broken-down old cowboy named Tom Smith to train his horses to race. He asks Smith why he recently bothered to rescue a lame old horse that seemed to have little use.

Tom replied, "You don't throw a whole life away just 'cause it's banged up a bit. Every horse is good for something." This devotion to horses convinces Howard to hire Tom as his trainer. Together, they find and purchase Seabiscuit, a horse with physical shortcomings and a problematic temperament, but a lot of heart. Tom begins to train the horse.

He hires a second-rate jockey named Red Pollard to ride Seabiscuit. Unbeknown to Tom, Red is blind in one eye, which costs him a big race at

Santa Anita. Tom is enraged when he finds out that Red had hidden his disability from him. He urges Mr. Howard to fire Red, but Howard refuses. When Tom demands a reason, Howard says, "You don't throw away a whole life just because it's banged up a bit." Seabiscuit went on to win many races, including a head-to-head race with Man 'O War, thought to be the best horse in the country. And Red Pollard continued to ride him.

Jonah, and other biblical characters like him, remind us that God doesn't "throw away a whole life just because it's been banged up a bit." And God isn't done with you, either, no matter what you've done, or how young or old you are, or whatever shortcomings you might have. God still loves you and has plans for you. Perhaps, the best God can do is to take imperfect, broken people like Jonah, and you and me, and use them to accomplish his purposes.