

The Jonah Dilemma
By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

Jonah 4: 1-11

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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. 3 Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. 6 Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant[a] and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.” 9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” 10 But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 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?”

If you've been around here for a couple of years, you may remember that at our Vacation Bible School we were visited by Jonah and the big fish that ate him! Here's a picture of the fish...



And here's a picture of Jonah.



And most folks remember that part of the story because it's pretty flashy, although the part where the fish tosses its prophets is less ingrained in our brains.

But many people forget WHY Jonah was there, and what happened afterward.

If I asked you to think of a group of people who you can't stand because of their values, who would you include? Over the past year we have heard a lot about Neo-Nazi groups, groups of people who support fascism, white supremacy organizations, and a conspiracy group called Q-Anon. I would

go out on a limb and use our neighbor Hillary Clinton's word, "deplorable" to describe these folks. In my mind, they represent the worst elements of our society and they demonstrate the antithesis of Christian living...the call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And if God came to me and said, "TODD, GO AND TELL THOSE FOLKS THAT WHAT THEY ARE DOING IS WRONG. TELL THEM THAT I AM DISPLEASED WITH THEIR WORDS AND THEIR BEHAVIORS AND IF THEY DON'T KNOCK IT OFF I WILL WIPE THEM OUT."

Well, what would you do? I confess that part of me wants God to wipe them out. Part of me doesn't want to give them a chance to change because they are doing so much harm and they aren't going to really change anyway. I might argue with God and say, "nawww." Can you imagine?

And I confess that part of me would be afraid to confront those folks because they have not shown themselves to be terribly receptive to constructive criticism. And I would point that out to God...wouldn't you?

I might even withdraw from God if God was persistent...but you know what happens there.



Jonah begrudgingly prayed to God and accepted the mission while he was inside the big fish.

Jonah begrudgingly went to the people of Nineveh and told them that what they were doing was wrong and displeasing to God. How would we say that to the groups I described?

1. Hating people for the color of their skin is not how God wants us to live.

2. Persecuting people because they have a different way of expressing their love of God is not right.

3. Spreading lies about people you disagree with causes divisions that hurt God's people.

Yes. All of those. And in the story of Jonah, the people listened and repented. They changed. They humbled themselves before God and asked for mercy and committed to a new way of living...which really ticked Jonah off. He says, *"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."* 4 *But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"* UGH! God can be sooo right! Which would really tick me off because, if God is going to let the "Ninevehn's" off despite what they did, then where is the justice? Where is their suffering? Where is their comeuppance?



I think that this picture sums up our dilemma. We are happy to work with folks who we like, who we agree with, who we are not afraid of, but we sit at the lips of a big fish when it comes to those who we consider foul.

Here is where God creates a living lesson.

It's hot outside, sooo hot! and God gives Jonah a tree to sit under.

It's hot outside the next day, sooo hot! and God takes away the tree for Jonah to sit under.

Jonah complains again and God challenges Jonah. *God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead." 10 But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 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?"*

These are actually the last words in the story. We are left with a question. A dilemma. A challenge that we might gain some perspective about if we consider little Theo before us this morning...as a lovely little plant in the desert.



Today we watered Theo. We participated in baptizing Theo. God took part, too. We promised to *join* with God in tending to this little tree in our midst. His family and sponsors promised to: *follow in the way of the Lord, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and*

word of God as best you are able.

We promised “*our love, support, prayers, and care.*”

Remember?

I’m guessing that at some point in the lives of those Q-Anon folks, and those Neo-Nazi’s; sometime in the life of the white supremacists and the fascist loving folks; at some point some group made a similar promise to some of them...maybe even many of them! More to the point, *God* saw them into this world and loved them, and has been nurturing them all along despite external input from people filled with hate.

So while we are basking in the warmth of Theo’s presence, enjoying his laughter and being amazed at his yowls! God is busy caring for Theo as well as all of the other “tree’s” in the world. God is loving, nurturing, tending to *all* of the Theo’s...and the world around them.

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?”

It turns out that God doesn't want to destroy Nineveh. God doesn't want them to remain out of relationship with the Holy. God desires that they get their acts together and return (like prodigal sons and daughters) to the sustaining presence of their Lord.

When God calls Jonah to correct Nineveh, God is calling us to correct those who are doing the worst of the worst in our community, in our country, in the world. God is calling us to act like partners, to care like we meant it when we made our promises to Theo today...because who knows? Theo may find himself in Nineveh someday, and it would be a travesty if we did not do all that we could to reconnect him with God's ways of caring, loving compassion, and justice.

It can be very upsetting to see what goes on in Nineveh. It may kindle an anger in us that is coupled with fear. Knowing that Theo might be inside is enough to give me the courage to speak out on God's behalf. I pray that it encourages you, likewise. Let's move away from the Big Fish's lips, and on to the work of offering the mercy we have received when God has forgiven us. Who knows, Nineveh might even listen and repent. Amen.