

Christchurch, Hitchin

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Team

Leading: Katherine Harris
Reading: Pauline Davis
Music: Andy Searle
Technology: Tony Edmonds
CCL 7011

Theme

Angry with God
Jonah 3:10 - 4:11



Welcome

This Monday saw the 'rule of 6' put in place in the hope of limiting the growing number of coronavirus infections in the UK. And now the talk is of a possible full lockdown in the near future. The pandemic is going on longer than any of us would like, and I'm afraid we are in it for the long haul. As much as we'd like for it all to just go away, that just isn't the reality we are facing.

And so I ask:



How are you? ... *really*

physically? mentally and emotionally? spiritually?

Take just a moment to acknowledge what's going on for you.

Are you okay with everything? Or are you worried and anxious?
Are you holding up through it all? Or is your resilience faltering?
Are you frustrated, dismayed, or even angry?
Or maybe you are weary, overwhelmed, apathetic?

No-one else needs to know. Or maybe you want to share it with someone.

But do take this moment to be completely honest with yourself and with God. Maybe it's quite different to what you have been projecting to other people around you. Maybe it's not.

We don't have to pretend to God that we are something different than what we actually are. (We'll certainly see a brutal honesty with God in today's Bible reading.)

So, how are you? ... *really* ... just between you and God?

I can assure you that God is with you, in whatever circumstances you find yourself in.

We are welcomed into God's presence, however we are.

We don't have to be a certain way. Whether we are content, frustrated, angry, weary, or at peace — we are welcome.

We don't have to have it all figured out. Whether we are confused, settled, apathetic, running away, or all riled up — we are welcome.

We are all welcomed into God's presence.

You are welcome.

Come now before God no matter what state you are in. God welcomes you with open arms.



Come, now is the time to worship *(Singing the Faith 24)*

Come, now is the time to worship.
Come, now is the time to give your heart.
Come, just as you are to worship.
Come, just as you are before your God.
Come.

One day ev'ry tongue will confess You are God,
one day ev'ry knee will bow.
Still, the greatest treasure remains for those
who gladly choose You now.

Come, now is the time to worship ...

Introduction

This morning we are looking at the Old Testament reading appointed for today: the last chapter of the short, but action-packed, book of Jonah. You may already be familiar with this reluctant prophet's story — running away from God, being thrown into the sea, swallowed by a giant fish before being thrown up (literally) three days later onto dry land. But there is so much more to this reluctant prophet than we might remember from childhood. And not many can recall what happens to Jonah after his unusual rescue by a giant fish. ◆

It's a brilliant story, full of humour and satire, where faithfulness is displayed, not by the LORD's prophet, but by pagan sailors and residents of a violent, rival empire. Even the prophet's name, Jonah son of Amittai — meaning 'Dove, son of Righteousness' — could not be more ironic, as his intentions are *anything but* peaceful toward the residents of Nineveh to whom he is sent with God's message of repentance.



Nineveh (modern day Mosul, Iraq) was a great city in the ancient Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were renowned for their military brilliance ... and their brutality. Public buildings in Nineveh displayed carved reliefs in which King Sennacherib recorded his invasion of Judah in 701 B.C. Enemies were skinned alive, impaled, beheaded and many other cruel and gruesome punishments for their refusal to submit to Assyria. So for God to send Jonah to Nineveh and call them to repentance would be like sending a Jew into Nazi Germany with a message to repent and God will save them.

Jonah wants God to wreak revenge on the enemy Assyrians, destroy them utterly like Sodom and Gomorrah, but he knows God is gracious and compassionate. So Jonah turns his back on God and runs as far as possible in the opposite direction. But God intervenes, rescues, restores and reinstates him, only to have Jonah then attempt to sabotage God's message to the Ninevites. He preaches just five words: 'Forty days more, Nineveh overthrown.' (A bit short on the details!!!) Jonah does his best to do the absolute least he can, hoping the Ninevites will fail to repent and God will utterly destroy them.

Despite this, God's grace triumphs, and a livid Jonah must confront God's unbearable mercy.

And this is where we pick up the story.

Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. 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. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

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. Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant 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. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. 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."

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."

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. 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?"

Angry with God

We see the entire spectrum of God's actions and humanity's reactions in this Bible passage — from the large to the small to nothing at all.

from the large ... (Jonah's anger)

In response to the Ninevite's wickedness, we see a gigantic, fierce, burning anger that looks something like this ...

You might think that it would be from God when seeing the cruelty of the Assyrian empire, which is why Jonah is sent to proclaim judgment against Nineveh. Certainly Jonah wants God to punish them, destroying them utterly (think Sodom and Gomorrah), but it's not God's burning anger, but Jonah's!



God is not at our beck and call - God's ways are not our ways, and vice versa

Jonah is just like a toddler having an extreme temper tantrum because he did not get his own way! God doesn't do what he wants God to do — Nineveh has repented and God has relented. Jonah quotes Psalm 103:8 in fury, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."

The five-word message that Jonah delivered, 'Forty days more, Nineveh overthrown' was intended by Jonah to be ignored. The Hebrew word (*hapak*) can be translated as "overthrown" or "destroyed". But it can mean "changed" or "transformed". And, indeed, *that* is what happened. God is abounding in compassion for those who turn to Him, regardless of what has transpired before.

Jonah is more than angry, incensed, infuriated — he would rather die than to live with God's generous mercy, which Jonah finds unbearable when extended to his enemies. This is passion (!!!) without any passion. But God is patient with Jonah, dispute his outbursts.

It demonstrate that we can encounter God's compassionate heart in the fullest depth and range of our emotions, no matter how ugly or unpleasant they may be, though we rarely do. Nothing is too hard or too harsh to bring before God, after all the Psalms are full of anguished crying out to God. But we generally prefer to present to God only what we think is acceptable. But we will not shock God.

God's grace is larger even than Jonah's anger. So even during Jonah's severe temper tantrums, God acts to *hapak* Jonah (change, not destroy).

to the small ... (worm)

From the large to the small ... God appointed a giant fish, a leafy plant, a tiny worm, and a scorching east wind to get through to Jonah.

The same Hebrew verb (*vayman*) is used for each one of these. It means "appoints", "provides", or "prepares". So the entirety of creation (represented by the sea, land, and air), from giant to tiny animals is *vayman* in order to accomplish God's purposes for Nineveh and for Jonah.



'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' Romans 8:28

God has already used the sailors, pagans considered to be God's enemies, to show righteousness to Jonah. And now Jonah's enemies demonstrate true repentance and righteousness, despite the cruelty and brutality of their past. And *this* is what John finds intolerable: God has forgiven *them*.

Jonah has been shown up by his enemies. And now Jonah has been shown up by a tiny worm. And his anger is fully reignited.

to nothing at all (missing ending/anticlimax)

God draws Jonah's attention to his compassion for a leafy plant and his complete lack of compassion for 120,000 human beings.

And that's the end — it all rather sudden. It jars; something is missing. The story seems unfinished; there are too many loose ends.

Jesus often uses this technique. Think of the parable of the 'prodigal son', which could be renamed 'two lost sons'. (We don't know how the elder brother reacts to his father's pleading for reconciliation.) Without an ending, we are left to focus on the unresolved issue of the story: forgiveness.

The unresolved issue of Jonah's story is the same: forgiveness, whether deemed appropriate or not. God has forgiven even people of the Assyrian empire, and invites Jonah to do the same. But will he?

Jonah had drawn the line with the Ninevites. God's grace had gone too far for him to accept.

God's love is so expansive, that the very essence of God's grace saves us and scares us in equal measure.

If we are honest, we are a lot like Jonah. Maybe not in the depth of our anger, but we too draw the line somewhere. There are people we choose not to forgive. We justify our grievances, because *they* have done wrong. *They* need to be taught a lesson.

So where do you draw the line on *your* compassion and forgiveness?

Who do you include?

Who do you exclude?

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LORD, forgive us.

As Christians, we are commanded to go beyond forgiveness. Jesus makes it clear:

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Luke 6:27-28

And God's love and mercy is wide enough to cover us when we fail.

Thank God for that.



There's a wideness in God's mercy (*Singing the Faith* 416)

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|---|---|
| 1 There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in His justice
which is more than liberty. | 4 For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind. |
| 2 There is plentiful redemption
in the Blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head. | 5 But we make His love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify His strictness
with a zeal He will not own. |
| 3 There is grace enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss. | 6 If our love were but more simple
we should take Him at His word;
and our lives would be illumined
by the presence of our Lord. |
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Frederick William Faber (1814-1863)

Prayers

God of the large,
Sometimes we feel overwhelmed.
In the silence, we place this before You ...
Problems seem so large and our resources and responses seem so small ...
Help us to remember Your grace is wider and Your compassion is greater than we can imagine.
Be with us, and restore us in Your love.

God of the tiny,
An invisible virus is overwhelming us.
In the silence, we bring before this before You ...
Problems seem so large and our resources and responses seem so small ...
Help us to remember Your grace is wider and Your compassion is greater than we can imagine.
Be with us, and restore us in Your love.

God of the missing endings,
We think of the people we miss and the broken relationships which we are in.
In the silence, we bring before this before You ...
It seems so large and our capacity to cope seems so small ...
Help us to remember Your grace is wider and Your compassion is greater than we can imagine.
Be with us, and restore us in Your love.

God of love,
forgive our failure to love.
Through Jesus You have shown us a better way
and make it possible to forgive and even to love our enemies.
Give us a clean heart and a right spirit to start again.
Amen.

Lord's Prayer

I invite you now to say out loud the Lord's prayer.
Use whichever version you prefer. Use whichever language feels most natural.
Although we are apart, we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught us.

Our Father...

Blessing

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love ... for you.
May you know this when life is easy. May you feel this when life is hard.
May you receive grace upon grace, overflowing from the fullness of God.
And may you share God's compassion with all you meet.



Blessèd be Your name *(Singing the Faith 41)*

1 Blessèd be Your name
in the land that is plentiful,
where Your streams of abundance flow,
blessèd be Your name.

And blessèd be Your name
when I'm found in the desert place,
though I walk through the wilderness,
blessèd be Your name.

Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise,
And when the darkness closes in, Lord,
Still I will say:

*Blessèd be the name of the Lord,
blessèd be Your name.
Blessèd be the name of the Lord,
blessèd be Your glorious name.*

2 Blessèd be Your name
when the sun's shining down on me,
when the world's 'all as it should be,'
blessèd be Your name.

And blessèd be Your name
on the road marked with suffering,
though there's pain in the offering,
blessèd be Your name.

Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise,
And when the darkness closes in, Lord,
Still I will say:

Blessèd be the name of the Lord ...

You give and take away,
You give and take away.
My heart will choose to say,
'Lord, blessèd be Your name.'

Blessèd be the name of the Lord ...