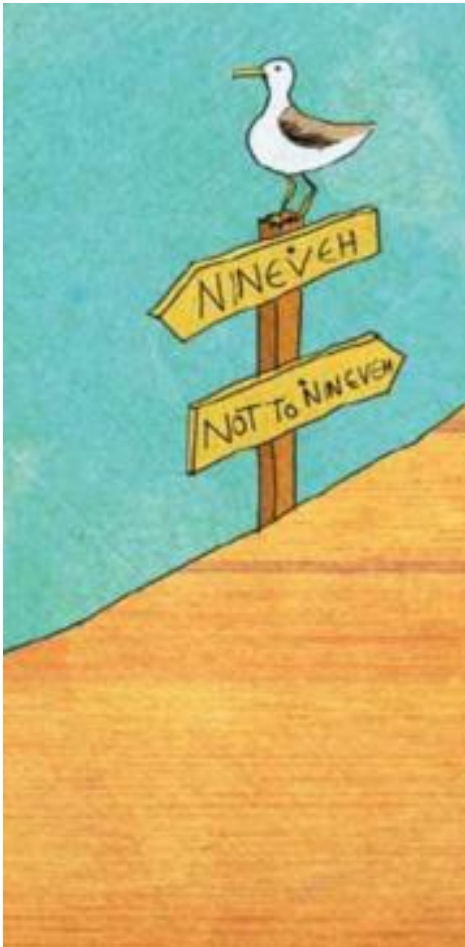


JONAH: The End of the Story



We've been following two equally compelling threads:

How God works THROUGH Jonah for the sake of Nineveh

How God works IN Jonah to shape him as a person and a prophet

Last week: **God working THROUGH Jonah.**

After a long and complicated journey,

“Jonah entered the city, went one day’s walk and preached, “In forty days Nineveh will be smashed.”

The people of Nineveh listened and trusted God. They proclaimed a citywide fast and dressed in burlap to show their repentance. Everyone did it—rich and poor, famous and obscure, leaders and followers. ...

...God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their evil lives. He *did* change his mind about them. What he said he would do to them he didn’t do.” **Jonah 3:4-10**

This would have been an excellent place to end the story.

All's well that end's well?
Mission accomplished?
Celebration is in order!

God's best hope for Nineveh was accomplished!

There should have been a party!

Maybe there was, in heaven. But Jonah doesn't go to the party. This is NOT the outcome he was expecting.

He was given one message: Nineveh will be overthrown. There was no contingency clause, "unless they repent".

It was an announcement of doom and Jonah delivered it straight.

All the way to Nineveh, Jonah pictured the destruction God was going to bring upon Israel's deadly enemy.

He had 375 miles to imagine the suffering that would come, the damage to the Assyrian army, the demolition of Nineveh.

And then God relents??

Jonah 4:1-2

“Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, "God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish!

I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!”

I think there is a long silence here that doesn't show up in the text.

I think God is absolutely gob smacked by Jonah's response.

“You say that like it's a bad thing!”

More silence while God tries to wrap his mind around Jonah's petulance.

Then God ventures:

Jonah 4:4

... "What do YOU have to be angry about?"

Jonah himself had received a rather dramatic rescue not long before! And he's mad because God is merciful to someone else?!

Jonah 4:5

“But Jonah just left. He went out of the city to the east and sat down in a sulk.

He put together a makeshift shelter of leafy branches and sat there in the shade to see what would happen to the city.”

This could be another place to end the story.

If Jonah is furious about God's mercy, maybe God should let him live without it for awhile!

But that's not how God works. We can walk away, but God will not. There is nowhere we can go that God is not. There is nothing we can do that will cause God to abandon us.

It is the central theme of the book of Jonah.

He keeps thinking he can escape from God, and yet everywhere he goes, God is there before him.

God was on the ship to Tarshish, in the belly of the whale, on the seashore where he finally washed up, and at every possible diversion along the road to Nineveh.

So when Jonah stomps out of town in a huff, darned if he doesn't find God waiting for him in the desert. Makes him even madder!

Wisely, God doesn't try to engage Jonah in conversation. Not just yet.

God creates a parable, a lived experience to try and get Jonah to recognize how terrible it is to live without the grace of God.

Jonah 4:6-11

“God arranged for a broad-leafed tree to spring up. It grew over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk.

Jonah was pleased and enjoyed the shade. Life was looking up.

But then God sent a worm. By dawn of the next day, the worm had bored into the shade tree and it withered away. The sun came up and God sent a hot, blistering wind from the east. The sun beat down on Jonah's head and he started to faint. He prayed to die: "I'm better off dead!"

Then God said to Jonah, "What right do you have to get angry about this shade tree?"
Jonah said, "Plenty of right. It's made me angry enough to die!"

God said, "What's this? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get?"

You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night.

So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than 120,000 childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong, to say nothing of all the innocent animals?"

It is telling that there is no answer to God's question.

Jonah is finally silenced.

Maybe we should be too. Silenced by the grace of God.

There is no place we have ever been that we were not surrounded by the grace of God.

All those moments of goodness in our lives?

All the “shade trees” that “just happened” to grow up next to us?

Good people? Happy places? Adequate food and shelter?

Every step along the way, that was God at work.

“Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

And the times when we've watched in horror as our shade disappeared for one reason or another –a pandemic, the economy, a broken relationship, a lost child, a hurtful friend, a terrible boss, damaged health?

God is no less present with us then, sustaining us in the scorching sun, opening our eyes to those who suffer along with us.

I know this to be true.

The desert sun was scorching hot when our son died. The temperatures rose again when I became very ill about 10 years ago.

What I know to be true is that God is with us whether we're resting in the shade or sweating in the sun with the wind blowing sand in our eyes.

It was true for Jonah.

It was true for Nineveh, Jonah's most feared enemy, right down to their burlap covered goats.



It is true for us, and for our city, and for our most feared enemies.

Romans 8:38

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.