

"Longing for God"

Sermon by Rev. Molly DeWitt

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Jonah 3 *10 When 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.*

4 *But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He 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. 3 And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 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,[a] 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?"

- New Revised Standard Version

We have this great tradition in our Senior High camp every year. I'm not sure how long it has been happening, but every night after our all-camp activity and snack, our Sr. High comes together as a group for "Relationship Rap." Just by the name it sounds thrilling, I know. When I was a camper we had something similar, called Open Forum. It was a space to ask life questions and get real answers from our cool college-aged counselors. It was a space to get real life advice from young adult mentors that we trusted.

At Pyoca, Relationship Rap looks a little different because the youth are in charge of the discussion, rather than the counselors. Youth are allowed to place any question inside the Relationship Rap box throughout the day. And I mean anything. It doesn't matter how silly or outrageous. The questions are then 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 have ranged 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 answering these tough questions, with a bit of guidance from a handful of 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.

Now think in our adult world, do you think there are many spaces like that for us today? Ones that are free to express our feelings and beliefs, without the judgment or chastising of others? Is there anywhere we feel safe enough?

This summer's camp curriculum is called *This is Our Prayer*,¹ and every day's theme focuses on a different prayer practice. Today's text from Jonah 4 comes from Day 3 of our curriculum. Each day views 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 prophesy revealed by God and coming out of the mouths of the various prophets. Not Jonah. Jonah is the story of a prophet. We don't see Jonah prophesying, except for one verse. What we do see him doing in the story is running, pouting, and becoming full of emotion.

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 prophesy, a lot of people don't really know what to do with it. There are a lot of ways to categorize it. In many ways, it reads like a parable. A parable is a story from which we discern a deeper religious and spiritual meaning. Yet, like Jesus' parables, there's a lot we can take and interpret from these stories. 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. Jonah for me as a child was a wild story about a man who was scared, got swallowed by a fish, but inevitably did what God asked of him. But now, from my 29 year old pastoral and female lens, I tend to think that Jonah at the end of his story acts like a petulant child. 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 of them are flawed people that God is 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 and not excused for their poor behavior.

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.

¹ InsideOut Christian Resources for Outdoor Ministries, *This Is Our Prayer*, Summer Camp Curriculum: 2020, <https://insideoutcurriculum.com/>.

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 "It was evil to Jonah and it burned him." Seems kind of rough to translate that the act that God did for the people of Nineveh Jonah saw 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 people of Nineveh, 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 he is burning and sees this act as evil. God shows mercy and compassion upon those who do right, and Jonah isn't having it. Jonah and God go through a tense back and forth over the next few verses.

Jonah is so upset that he tells God it would be better to die than 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 the fate of the city (perhaps he was hoping God's mind would change again). 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. So, I think that what happens next is even more interesting, maybe even a bit comical and dramatic.

God appoints a bush to grow over Jonah. Mind you, he already has the booth as a 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 then 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 in Hebrew, "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 something. And when he realizes God is not going to destroy the city, he asks for destruction upon himself.

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.

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 somehow 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 people.

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 the other 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 that if we follow God's command that inevitably the result will benefit us. And, maybe, a little bit of vengeance within us leaps with joy when we see the people we think deserve destruction being held at the mercy of God.

The last thing we hear from the entire book is from God. God says to him, "*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?*"

The book of Jonah calls us to question, "In today's world, who 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 don't 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 to be angry. 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. Our church is imagining it as we speak. I would like to leave you with the 2020 Vision statement from the Presbyterian Church's upcoming General Assembly, which will lead our denomination into the next decade:

We are called to be: "**Prayerful.** *Reformed and always being reformed, we follow the Holy Spirit in new and imaginative ways to places we have not yet been. Confessing our sin to God and those we have wronged, we accept our responsibility for the brokenness in the world and in ourselves. In Christ we are assured of forgiveness and freed to forgive others.*

We ask the Holy Spirit to direct and guide us as we actively listen to Scripture and fully engage in the joys and challenges of life in this present world.

By grace Christ binds us together, cleanses us in the waters of baptism, nourishes us at the Lord's table, and sends us out to share the Good News."

We are called to be: "**Courageous.** *We foster the hope of reconciliation in Christ who transforms the world through healing individuals and communities.*

We work for God's justice and peace for all people in every land, walking with the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the abused."

We are called to be: "**United.** *As members of the Church universal, we are Christ's disciples, called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit.*

Against forces that seek to divide, Christ compels us to bear witness to a love that connects communities across great differences.

We approach others in a spirit of openness and trust as we follow Jesus Christ in respecting the freedom of other religions, worldviews, and traditions.”

We are called to be: “**Serving.** *Gratefully following the One who washed his disciples’ feet, we listen to our neighbors, working to meet their practical needs.*

We partner with others to become the hands and feet of God in the world, showing compassion and generosity to all creation.

The Holy Spirit pushes us beyond the familiar, meeting people where they are as we share Christ’s transformative love.”

We are called to be: “**Alive.** *We are people of the resurrection: though death surrounds us, we are not afraid because we follow the One who was raised from the tomb.*

The Holy Spirit gives us courage to build a community that reflects the fullness of God’s image in humanity: beautifully diverse in age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexuality, physical and mental ability, geography, and theological conviction.

In the sure and certain hope of resurrection, we joyfully testify that the Church and its members are called to follow Christ’s model by risking all, even life itself, for the sake of the Gospel.”⁵

Amen.

⁵ PC(USA) General Assembly, Mike Ferguson, “Spelling out a vision for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” Feb. 19, 2020, Accessed Feb. 20, 2020, https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/spelling-out-a-vision-for-the-presbyterian-church-u-s-a/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=Vision2020&fbclid=IwAR1PceWAAOSIrbWR7AF_eo8DwifAMR2iY1sMZrew3_p6A6ACmDQSZnM89KQ.