

Praying for Fire and Brimstone

Last in a series of four sermons on Jonah

A sermon preached at

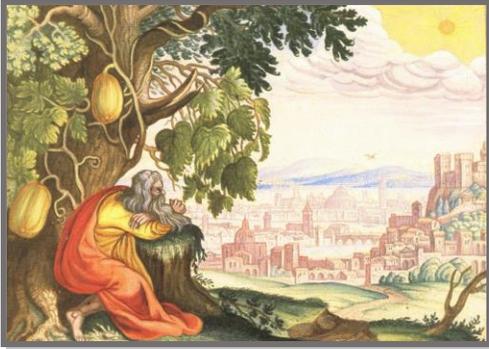
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church

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Text: Jonah 4



Where do we find ourselves in the story that we just read? To help us think about this, I'm going to divide the congregation into four groups. Here on my right, you will be Nineveh. To my left, you will be Israel, on the far left, you will be Jonah, and on the balcony, you will be God.

OK let's start with Nineveh. You people here on the right, what does your name conjure up? Have you heard the name "Third Reich" before?

It conjures up Hitler's empire: aggressively invading countries, toppling governments, wholesale brutal slaughter. Sorry, Nineveh, but that's exactly what your name conjures up too, in the minds of the people who first read this story. They equated the name Nineveh with death and destruction. But Nineveh, God has called you to repentance through the prophet Jonah, and you heard God's call. Through your actions, you are saying, "We're sorry!" Say that please, "We're sorry." "WE'RE SORRY!" You have repented and God has offered you mercy! Thanks be to God!

Israel here on my left. You are God's chosen people, you have followed God for centuries. You're not like those Gentile countries, like Assyria with its capital city Nineveh, worshipping idols made of wood and gold. You feel superior to them. You haven't been perfect, but you've tried to live by God's laws. You and all the countries around have suffered because of Assyria. Look at Nineveh sitting over there... they look so innocent, but **you** know what they've done. They are an idol-worshipping enemy that has threatened your existence. Everyone hates Nineveh. They deserve the wrath of God, they deserve God's punishment!!!! Huzzah is a battle cry. Can Israel say "huzzah!" HUZZAH!

Jonah, you are a prophet, giving messages to the king of Israel. When God calls you to give a message to your enemy Nineveh, you ran away, because you know that God is "...a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."(4:2). You don't want Nineveh to get any messages from God, because if they did repent, you know that God might forgive their sins. When God stops you mid-flight and sends you packing to Nineveh, you are still thinking, "they will never repent." Instead, the worst happens, Nineveh repents. Your reaction is to think, "No way!!!" Can you say that? "NO WAY!!!" You yell at God... you get angry! The word anger in Hebrew means literally "burned up". You're totally

burnt up about this, saying, “Nineveh gets forgiven over my dead body” (4:3)!!! You go outside the city, waiting for God to pour fire and brimstone down from heaven.

And then, we have God, up on the balcony. Look at Nineveh down there. You created those people. Nineveh hold up your right hand so God knows who you are. Hold up your left hand. No, your right hand. You see, they don’t know their right hand from their left! Although Nineveh is called great, you know they are far away from true greatness. You see them being cruel, you see them causing great misery. Their sin angers you, it fills you with sorrow. You have compassion. The Hebrew word for compassion, comes from the word “womb”. You have a wombish feeling for them, you care for them like a mother’s body cares for an unborn child. You hope, hope against hope, that they will change. You send them prophets, you give them another chance to become who they were meant to be. You hold back your hand from destruction. You say, “I love you” to Nineveh. Can you say that, “I LOVE YOU!”

Now, look at Israel over there. You have done so much for them, you love them too. You gave them the Law, you gave them judges and kings and prophets. In spite of the way they keep turning from you, you love them. You love them, even if it’s through your dead body. Say, “I love you” to Israel. “I LOVE YOU!”

And Jonah over there, what a sorry excuse for a prophet. But you look at him, and he’s so.... lovable! Say “I love you” to Jonah. “I LOVE YOU!” You try again to get him to see what you’re about. You grow a plant to shade him—he’s so grateful for the plant, and then he’s mad when it dies. You try to explain, “Jonah, you love the plant, only because of what it does for you, for how it helps you. I loved the plant because I created it. I created Israel, and Nineveh. You don’t earn my love, you have it because I made you.”

Now Jonah over here, he listens to that speech by God, thinking, “I know I know....but God, you can’t trust Nineveh, look at them. They SAY they’re sorry, but they’re not really. How long is it going to last? A week, a month, a year, ten years? And then what? They’ll go back to their old cruel ways. They’ll be on a rampage again. They’ll be out there hunting your chosen people again. They’ll come and kill us in our beds. Destroy them now, before they do any more harm!”

God says, “Jonah, Jonah, Jonah, I love these people, I want to give them another chance.”

God doesn’t say to Jonah, “Stop feeling that way!” God knows the deep hurt of the Israelites.

God instead says, “I have compassion, and I want you to act on my behalf.”

Jonah had an inkling what might happen. He sensed that Nineveh would not stay repentant.

And in fact, they did not. A generation after Jonah, around 750 BCE, Assyrian King Tiglath Pileser the III invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel and conquered it, sending much of the population into exile.

What I find amazing is that the book of Jonah is in the Hebrew Bible at all. Here is a prophet, going to the enemy of Israel, and relating that its capital city of Nineveh repented. A book which tells us that God loves Nineveh. This book is practically cheek by jowl with the book of Nahum, which foretells the destruction of Assyria.

Most Jewish and Christian scholars agree from the language and style of Jonah, that it was one of the last books of the Hebrew Bible to be written. It most definitely was written long after Nineveh had conquered Israel. The Hebrew Bible was canonized or formalized hundreds of years after the events we are looking at. Imagine all of the people that were copying out holy books, year after year, by hand, onto scrolls. You can imagine the temptation that might exist to skip this small book. This book that talks of love for enemies, God's mercy even on the Nineveh, who destroyed Israel.

But in it stayed, and tradition has it that this book is read publicly every year on the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the day of repentance. So every year, on the day of repentance, the Jews hold up Nineveh as a model for repentance, they remember God's grace that extends even to their arch enemies.



As I was thinking about Jonah, I thought about something that the artist Maurizio Cattelan created in 2001. It's a sculpture called simply, "Him". It's usually displayed so that you can only see it from far away, and from the back, it looks very much like a child praying, because it's child-size.



It actually is a very realistic looking sculpture of an adult Adolf Hitler, kneeling, as if in prayer. This piece of art has gotten a lot of emotional responses. It especially got a lot of press when it was displayed in a building by the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland, a place where 300,000 Jewish people were killed or sent to their death. Some people thought it posed a good question about love for enemies. "If Hitler would repent, would God forgive him?" Others thought that perhaps the author was suggesting that Hitler needed to repent. The Simon Wiesenthal Centre, suggested that this statue is a "senseless provocation which insults the memory of the Nazis' Jewish victims."

I think that to the people of Israel, who had been almost destroyed by Nineveh, the book of Jonah would have been like this statue. Controversial. How could God love Nineveh? And yet, this text proclaims that indeed, God's love extends even to our enemies. And as controversial as it was, it ended up in Hebrew scripture, and in our Christian Bible.

How does the book of Jonah inform our lives, our community? The book of Jonah was on my mind a number of years ago when I read a story of something that happened in Yorkton Saskatchewan. A 16 year old girl, Jadah Walker, starts living with a 24 year old man, James Hayward. James Hayward is a drug dealer, and he gives his girlfriend Jadah drugs. In fact, she claims that he injects her with drugs while she is sleeping to get her addicted. Jadah's family is very very worried about her, but they can't get her to leave him. Finally, Jadah's father Joseph Walker, has had enough. He is so worried about her, because she is living with a drug dealer in a drug house, and so he takes a gun to go to the house to get her out of there. There is a confrontation, and Joseph Walker shoots and kills James Hayward the drug dealer, and takes his daughter home. And of course Joseph Walker is arrested and stands trial for the murder of James Hayward.

This happens in a small town of 15,000 people, and it was a pretty big story. Everyone was rallying around Joseph Walker, saying what a great dad he was, and how he was only acting out of love for his daughter, how his actions **saved** his daughter from a life of drugs and death. And in fact the daughter herself said in court that her dad saved her life by getting her out of there. Joseph Walker was a local hero. I was listening to all this on a newscast one night. And they were interviewing people who basically said what a loser James Hayward was, and what a threat he was in the community. And I'm a mom, I have a daughter, and I'm right here with Israel going "Huzzah!" A guy like James Hayward— a guy like that makes me sick to my stomach, and the world is better off without him. And in this news story I was going right along thinking fire and brimstone thoughts, "I can see why you'd want to kill a guy like that after what he did."

And then the news story shifted perspective. The reporter then interviewed James Hayward's mother. The murdered man's mother. With simple quiet dignity she said, "Because no one told me that James was taking drugs before Mr. Walker murdered him, I was never given the opportunity to save **my** son."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, I am *hapaked*...overthrown [see sermon #3 in this series]. I'm a mother of a son too. I'm lurched from sitting over there with Israel to sitting over here with James Hayward's mother, and the God who created him. God loves James Hayward. James needed a chance to be saved too. A chance that was snuffed out by a bullet from a gun.

We are so often tempted to hate our enemies, to wish the worst on them, to forget that they are loved by God too.

And then just the other week, I heard another story that reminded me of Jonah. I've mentioned a couple of times that the ancient city of Nineveh is located in the modern city of Mosel.



In fact the early Christians built a church there where ancient Nineveh was, to honour Jonah. In the late 1300s this church was changed into a mosque and it was still a holy place of pilgrimage because Jonah or Younas wasn't sacred only to Jewish and Christians, but also to Muslims, because he was a prophet of Allah. This shrine is called the Mosque of Younas (or Jonah). It's a pilgrimage site for all three religions...Jewish, Christian, Muslim.

If you've been following the news, you know that Mosel has been in the front lines of the conflict between the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its opponents. And in fact, ISIS captured the city of Mosel earlier this year, and this summer they started a campaign of destroying religious sites. This includes the Mosque of the Prophet Younas, among other sites. In July of this year, the mosque was locked, people were directed to stay away from it, and it was blown up with explosives.



The reason given was, "the mosque had become a place of apostasy not prayer." Their concerns was that these holy places had become places that were worshipped rather than Allah being worshipped.



The people who destroyed these shrines believed that it was a holy thing they were doing, because people were worshipping the images or the places rather than Allah. But now all that history is gone, reduced to rubble.

Now, if you are like me, this sort of thing just burns you up. When you see things like this, you want to yell "Huzzah!" I was thinking to myself, "This is absolutely appalling, it's unconscionable." Unconscionable, which means, among other things, "unforgivable".

These people are modern day iconoclasts, destroying things that are considered holy. But when I found myself using the word “iconoclast”, it got me thinking.



The word “iconoclast” was coined to describe the actions of Christians. In one of the earliest divisions of the Christian church, in the 700s and 800s, the eastern and western churches were divided over whether you should have pictures in church. Churches fought over this, people died, countless ancient artworks from the earliest church were destroyed. This is a picture from the 800s of an ancient iconoclast, with a spear attacking a picture of Jesus. I hope you catch the irony here, of having a picture of an iconoclast. The ultimate revenge, I think of the icon lovers, to draw pictures of iconoclasts destroying icons.

And again in the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, there was an outcry against icons, and another wave of iconoclasm hit the church. “People are worshipping images not God,” they cried, as they killed people, ripped down shrines, destroyed countless priceless ancient holy paintings, statues and stained glass windows that were lost to history forever.

Where am I sitting? Should we hate the Eastern Church because they were iconoclasts? Should we hate Protestants because they were iconoclasts? Should we hate Muslim fundamentalists because they are iconoclasts? God had patience with Eastern Church and the Protestants, fire and brimstone did not rain down, even though undoubtedly there were people who were praying for it.

We are all prone to judging others and being eager to see their punishment. In fact many of the prophets do rejoice at God’s justice and the way God’s judgement falls on evildoers. But Jonah is different. Jonah sits cheek by jowl with these books. It’s the only book in the Bible that **ends** with a question. God asking plaintively, “Should I not have compassion on those I created?”



This question echoing through the ages, echoing in the mind of Jonah, a broken prophet, warped by his hatred of his enemies. Echoing in the mind of Israel, wondering why God allows evil, wondering why God spared Nineveh for so long, wondering why God spared the Third Reich for so long.

<http://www.josephnmillersculpture.com/images/dove-over.jpg>

“Should I not have compassion on those I created?” This question echoing into our church here today, echoing into our lives, challenging us to look at the places where we are praying for fire and brimstone, where we are lacking in compassion.

God's love for the world was there from the beginning in scripture. From creation, where God created the world, and it was good. From the call of Abram, where he was told that he and Sarai would be parents of a chosen people. Chosen, not because they were special and the best. But chosen so that through them all the nations of the earth could be blessed.

The angels, on the night Jesus was born, said that they were bringing "good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people" (Luke 2:10). Jesus himself, the day that he read scripture for the first time in his home town of Nazareth, he reminded his listeners that God has grace for all people. He reminded the Nazarenes that God had grace for foreigners...the widow of Zarephath, and Naaman the Syrian. He told them, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor....to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19). Favour for all people. For this word of hope, they wanted to hurl him off a cliff.

God wants to bless everyone. And so we can choose either to go God's way, to be a means of blessing everyone, or we can go our own way. Like Jonah we can run away from having to spread that good news, or we can go reluctantly, still hoping that God will give people what they deserve. We want punishment for those evildoers. Maybe it's a person in your family, a fellow church member, someone at work, a former friend. Maybe we are tempted to join with our community, our culture, our country in having enemies.

Jonah means dove, a book that brings an olive branch of good news to all people, especially in dark times. This morning we sat in Nineveh's chair. We sat in Jonah and Israel's chair. We are invited to sit in God's mercy seat, to feel God's compassion. As followers of Jesus, we are called to carry that olive branch of peace, that message of hope and good news, no matter what the cost.