

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“The Jonah in Me”
Jonah Chapters 1, 3, & 4
All Saints Day
November 6, 2016

I know the question that you all want answered today about Jonah’s story. It’s been pressing in your mind for years now. When you think of Jonah, you think of one other character that is central to this story, right?

In fact, for a lot of us, the title of this book isn’t just “Jonah,” like it says in our bibles. In our mind’s eye, the title of this story is
“Jonah and ...? “the whale.”

Right, so what about the whale? I mean what really happened here? Was he really in a whale?

Before I answer that question, let me just point out that that is not the only surprising part of this story. I mean, Jonah had the most successful preaching career in the history of the world. He preaches a one -sentence sermon and the whole city repents and turns to God. I mean ***all of them!*** Even the king puts on ash and sackcloth.

He’s got a 100% batting average going. This is even more surprising than the Cubs winning the World Series.

But that’s not what you want to know, right? ***Was Jonah really in the whale?***

Well, let me just say, from a preacher’s standpoint, Jonah being swallowed by a whale... is probably the most believable part of the story.

The whole city repenting?

Not so much. Even Jesus didn’t have that record.

You see, to read this story well, you’ve got to have a bit of a sense of humor. There’s a lot of playfulness, a lot of irony here.

And sometimes with our serious, stodgy, anxious questions about historicity, we miss out, not only on what they are actually trying to say, but we miss out on how wonderfully playful these stories in the scriptures are.

I mean, you almost have to laugh when Jonah gets angry in Chapter 4 and starts throwing his temper tantrum. **“God, I knew this would happen!”** he says. And then he starts throwing God’s words back at God. He starts quoting from Exodus 34 **“You’re such a ‘gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,’ it just ticks me off!”**

He’s like a sulking teenager who has crossed his arms saying, **“It’s just not fair!... so I’m going to cross my arms, pout around the house, and slam my bedroom door so everyone knows I’m mad!” I’m going to go sit up here on my desert perch, pop some popcorn and wait for the city to be destroyed anyway.”**

I mean you have to laugh at this scene. Jonah could not be more melodramatic. “If you’re going to forgive them, God... then...then I’d rather just be dead! ...What do you think about that?” ...as if that is going to throw God off God’s game.

And the irony is so rich and thick there, isn’t it? I mean it’s exactly because of God’s mercy and compassion that Jonah isn’t already dead at the bottom of the ocean.

And the irony goes on. You see, this story isn’t mostly about the whale. I’m sorry to disappoint you. In fact, the great fish is only mentioned twice in the whole story. Shoot, even sackcloth is mentioned more than that.

It’s really a playful story, a parable of sorts, that’s supposed to get us laughing at Jonah, or at least seeing how ridiculous he is... so that hopefully... we’ll be able to see how ridiculous we can be.

After all, it’s a whole lot easier to shake our heads at him, than to see our own silly games we play with God’s grace.

So, let’s stick with Jonah, and not talk about us, OK?

As we do, it’s probably worth noting that Jonah’s story takes place in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in a time when the global super-power of their day was Assyria.

And there are a few things you should know about Assyria. For one, they were not a very nice kingdom. They had a lust for global dominance and were pretty effective at it.

In fact, I imagine there are two little mice running that country named Pinky and the Brain. And every day Pinky and the Brain have a conversation about what they’re going to do that day and the answer is always the same.

“Try to take over the world!”

This is what Assyria does... but truth be told, they were a bit more scary than two little mice. In fact, they were a whole lot more like ISIS... or Nazi Germany. They were brutal and cruel and even perverse.

And they certainly didn’t leave *Israel* alone.

In fact, you can read about their siege on Israel in 2 Kings 18. At one point they surround the capital of Israel and the Messenger from Assyria shouts out to them, **“You people on the wall, are doomed to eat your own dung and drink your own urine.”**

The Assyrians were nasty, cruel, domineering people. Picture the Evil Empire in Star Wars... and the King was a lot like the Evil Emperor Darth Sidious. And you’re starting to get the picture.

And the reason I tell you all this, is because the capital of Assyria... the place from where Darth Sidious was ruling, was none other than ...the city of Nineveh... the very place Jonah is called to go to and preach.

If you really get that, at how horrible Nineveh was,
if you recognize that the Ninevites are the oppressors of the world,
if you can see just how wretched and vile and evil the King of Nineveh was...
then you start to understand why Jonah gets so mad about God's mercy and compassion for them.

And let's be honest here. We're a pretty open and loving bunch. We trust in God's mercy and grace ...really... no matter how messy and awful your life has been. We don't think you have to have all the answers of your theology nailed down just right.

But even for us...
... even for you... I'm willing to bet there are a few people in this world who, in your hearts estimation, are quite simply beyond God's mercy and grace and compassion.

Maybe it's someone you know, who has hurt you deeply.
Maybe it's someone you've heard about...
or read about in the newspapers.
Some player on the global stage, maybe?
Who is that for you?

If you're really being honest with yourselves, there are a few people in this world... where the gulf between you and them is so great that there is simply not enough room even in heaven for the both of you.

So, if God welcomes them into grace, where does that put you?
but sitting outside,
alone in the desert,
watching in the scorching heat,
angry about the turn of events.

It's just not fair.

In fact, it may even call into question God's judgment, God's character.

The Scriptures consistently hold up two primary characteristics of God... especially in the Old Testament. God is just. And God is merciful. Both of these things are true. Both are at the center of why God is trustworthy.

We can trust that God is just.

And we can also trust that God is merciful with us.

Both of these things are true.

But the pattern that we see in the scriptures is that whenever these two things... God's justice and God's mercy, become irreconcilable, God's mercy always carries the day.

That's what this story of Jonah is really about... from beginning to end. There is a Divine Mercy that can reach even those in the darkest corners of our world. And it's the same Divine Mercy that is reaching out to you, when you've sunk deep down into the bottom of the sea,

alone, afraid,
distant from God,
and swallowed up by life.

You can run from grace all you want, but it will keep haunting you.
You can blind yourself to the possibility of it in others... but God will not be blind to them.

Last week I was reading what is considered one of the great early American Spiritual Writings, the journal of a Quaker named John Woolman.

One of the distinct emphases of Quakers is the belief that the divine light is in each and every human being, without exception. It may be more clouded in some than others, but it is there... hidden deep in the recesses of their being, even in the most unexpected people.

It's hard for us to see, and so... often... we simply write people off...
because that's a lot easier than looking deep enough to see a glimpse of God in them. But the Quakers believed that we are called to look for it... to see it in each and every human being we encounter.

There was a Baptist pastor in the 1960's named Will Campbell. He was also a white civil rights activist in the South. He wrote about a time of deep personal crisis when his young nephew died and he found himself lost in a very dark place.

In the hours of despair, he was comforted by a relative of his with whom he had previously argued extensively against civil rights. This relative fought him tooth and nail on the issues of civil rights.

But as Campbell looks back and remembers that moment of being consoled by this relative, he writes, **“until dawn I sat in the redemptive company of a racist Jesus.”**¹

Even a hateful, racist relative... in the right moment became the conduit of Jesus' presence in his life.

¹ Will Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, 151. Quoted in James D. Nagalski, *Hosea – Jonah: The Book of the Twelve*, 443.

The spark of the Divine can be found in each and every person, if we can look deep enough to see it. And let me just be honest with you and say that I haven't quite learned how to do that. There are some people in this world that I can't see it in.

But God can see what we cannot see.

And God's grace can work in and through those we only know how to demonize... the people we're most inclined to write off as beyond the grasp of grace.

But how different would we be... if our hearts could open up enough to see the hidden light of God in *all* people?

How different would our relationships be?

How different would our politics be?

How different would your soul be, if it stopped judging and could glimpse the love, and compassion, and mercy of God that is chasing down and hidden in the soul of those you can't stand to be around?

That's where the playful story of Jonah wants to take us. It's a story where the prophet, the holy one of God, is the one running away, angry.

But the supposed pagans... all of them in the story, the sailors on the ship, and the people of Nineveh are the ones responding to God,

turning toward God,

opening to God,

praying to God.

This is a story that is especially helpful for us to read today, on All Saints Day.

Today is the day we're invited to remember those people in our world and in our lives through which the light of God shown most brightly... because they also happen to be the same people who helped us to see and recognize God's light in others.

Those saints... are the ones who are always pointing out to us, the divine light in places and people we cannot see it in.. that we turn away from.

Mother Teresa saw the spark of God in the poorest of poor on the streets of Calcutta, among the sick, diseased, and dying. On those faces, she recognized the face of Jesus.

St. Francis began as the wealthy son of a merchant. He lived in a time when leprosy was a terrifying and awful disease... where your body would gradually rot on your bones... and body parts would rot and fall off and you'd become slowly more and more deformed.

So, any time Francis saw a leper, he would shudder in disgust and revulsion. In fact, he couldn't even look at them, it was so deeply gut wrenching and disturbing to him.

But one day, after receiving a word from God, he came across a leper while riding on his horse. Rather than riding away, he dismounted, and shocked the world.

Francis reached into his pocket,

pulled out a coin... and reached out
and touched the leper, giving him the coin.
Then he took the man's deformed, diseased hand...
and kissed it.
Then received the kiss of peace from the leper.

The saints are the ones who help us to see the divine light, the sacred image of
God in the last people we're able to see it in.

Francis, Mother Teresa, and countless others have helped us to see what the Jonah
in each of us can't see.

The love, compassion, and mercy of God has no boundaries.
No beginning and ending.
Each life is sacred.
Each human being beloved by our Creator.

[transition to table]

And because it's so hard for us to grasp "***how wide and how deep***" this love runs,
our Creator, took on flesh, became embodied...
become one of us, so that we might know this love of God in a very personal way.

And Then Jesus demonstrated this love for the whole world,
for the holy and the unholy in that "***while we were still sinners Christ died
for us,***" as the scriptures say.

And he calls us to remember this deep love by coming to this table.

You see it was on the night he was betrayed...

... Today, as we prepare to come to this table, I want to invite you to ready yourself for
this kind of grace. Who are the people in your world that you simply don't know how to
love? As we sing and prepare for communion, begin to ask God to help you see them as
God sees them. Help you love as God loves.