



Sermon Transcript August 11, 2019

Marked By God's Mercy Jonah 3-4

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on August 11, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Introduction

When I say we are going to look at the book of Jonah this morning, I would imagine that your mind immediately rushes to the story of a runaway prophet and a “great big fish.” That is what most of us think about when we think of Jonah. I remember watching cartoons as a kid on a Saturday morning and I remember a scene where one of the characters was out on the ocean in a rowboat and he was swallowed up by a whale. There he was, sitting in his boat inside the belly of the whale. What did he see? Scrawled on the inside lining of the whale were these words: “Jonah was here.” That is what we think about when we think about the book of Jonah.

When we think of the book of Jonah, we think of a prophet who was called by God to “*go to Ninevah, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me,*” says God. When we think of the book of Jonah, we think of Jonah refusing to go and do what God called him to do. Instead, he gets on a boat that is going in the opposite direction from where he is supposed to go. When we think of the book of Jonah, we think of God sending a storm and it was determined that Jonah’s disobedience was the cause of the storm and so when he convinced the crew to throw him into the sea, the storm stopped. When we think of the book of Jonah, we think of a great fish that comes and swallows up Jonah, and while in the belly of the fish, this repentant prophet cries out to God and God hears his cry from the deep and so the fish spits him up onto dry ground. That is what we think about when we think of the book of Jonah. But that is just the first half of the book of Jonah. There are still two more chapters to go.

The events of Jonah 1-2 set us up for Jonah 3-4. It is in the second half of the book of Jonah that we discover the central character and the central point of the book. The central character of the book of Jonah is not Jonah. The central character of the book of Jonah is God. The central point of the book of Jonah is what this book tells us about God. The central point of the book of Jonah is that God is a merciful God and he is merciful to anyone and everyone who cries out to him for mercy.

This is a hopeful book because it gives testimony that there is not a person here this morning who is beyond the reach of God’s mercy. As we will see, that is the whole point of this book. If you are here this morning and you feel like you have crossed a line or strayed too far or have shut God out for too long; please know that the point of this book is that you are not out of the reach of God’s mercy.

This book is also instructive. There is a lesson that God is teaching Jonah in this book

and it is a lesson we need to learn as well. The lesson that we need to learn is that God's mercy marks God's people. In other words, God was teaching Jonah what Jesus was teaching his disciples when he said in Luke 6:36, "*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*" God's mercy marks God's people. May his mercy mark us this morning.

Keeping these central things in mind, lets read Jonah 3-4.

Jonah 3-4

^{3:1}Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

⁶The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

^{4:1} But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

⁵Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad

because of the plant. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” ⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰ And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Let’s look at God’s mercy and how God’s mercy marks God’s people.

God is Merciful

In the second half of the book of Jonah, we discover why Jonah went the other way when God called him to go to Ninevah. Jonah tells us why in Jonah 4:2. He says, “*O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*” Does that seem odd to you? The reason Jonah didn’t want to go to Ninevah to warn them of coming judgment was because he knew the character of God. He knew that if they repented, God would extend his mercy to them. He knew that God was a merciful God.

Now you have to put things into Old Testament perspective to appreciate what is happening here. Jonah is a prophet from the nation of Israel. Most of Israel’s prophets were sent by God to the people of Israel. They were sent by God to call God’s people back to God. But Jonah was sent to a Gentile nation. The Assyrians were Israel’s dreaded enemy. We are not exactly sure when Jonah was sent to Ninevah, the capital city of Israel’s enemy, but don’t forget that it is the Assyrians who eventually invade Israel in 722 B.C., taking them into captivity. The point that God is making to Israel and to Jonah—and to us, for that matter—is that God’s mercy is so universal, that he even extends it to the Gentile who repents and cries out to God for mercy. And it is even extended to the Gentile nation that was most hostile towards the nation of Israel. Therefore, God’s mercy is offered to everyone and anyone who repents.

How did Jonah know that God was “*a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster?*” He knew that God was

merciful because this is how God revealed himself to Moses the second time Moses came up to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 33:18 Moses asked God, *“Please show me your glory.”* In essence, Moses is asking God, “who are you?” “What are you like?” We can’t know what God is like unless God reveals himself to us. We don’t get to define for ourselves what we think God is like. Rather, we know what God is like because God has been pleased to reveal himself to us. And so God says to Moses, *“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’”* And that is what he does.

In Exodus 34, God passes before Moses and proclaims his name to Moses, *“The LORD, the LORD.”* This is the sacred name for God, revered so much by the Jewish worshiper that they can’t even bring themselves to pronounce it. It is the name *Yahweh*, or in English, *“Jehovah.”* It literally is translated *“I AM.”* It is a name that speaks to the fact that God has no beginning and no ending. He is self-existent. There is no one like God. But God doesn’t stop there. When he passes before Moses, he reveals to Moses what he is like. God says of himself, *“a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin.”*

Philip Ryken says that “this is one of the most important verses in the entire Bible. We know it’s important because it is quoted and referred to dozens of times.” Then he goes on to say, “this is the people’s working definition of God.”¹ Whenever anyone wanted to know who God was, this was their “go to” definition of God. This was their understanding of what God is like. I love that. Is that our “working definition of God?” If someone finds out you go to church and you worship God and they ask you, “tell me what you know about God;” is this your “go to” answer of what God is like? *“God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”* This is the character of God. Jonah knew this to be true of God and he knew that if the people of Ninevah repented, God would relent of his judgment and be merciful.

Now there is another side to the coin that defines God. Yes, God is a God of mercy. But as his goodness passes before Moses, God also says of himself in his very next breath, *“but who will by no means clear the guilty.”* God is merciful. But on the other side of the coin, you have this sense of the justice of God. You can’t have mercy without justice. The definition of “mercy” is to withhold the justice we deserve. But God’s mercy does not do away with God’s justice. God is just. Did you notice when God sends Jonah into Ninevah he instructs Jonah in Jonah 3:2 to *“call out against it.”* In verse 4 you discover that they had 40 days to repent or God would bring judgment against them. In Jonah

1:2 it says that the evil of Ninevah has come up before God. The call was to preach against them. The message Jonah brought to the city of Ninevah was not some fluffy, feel good message. Jonah didn't come to them with "Five steps to a happy life." Rather, he came to them with a call to repent of their sin or they will perish. It is the same thing Jesus said in Luke 13:3. He said, "*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*"

So how do you bring both sides of this coin together? How do you marry that justice of God with the mercy of God? When we talk about God being merciful we are not suggesting that God overlooks sin by turning a blind eye to it or by ignoring it or by sweeping it under the rug. He says rather emphatically to Moses that he "*by no means clears the guilty.*" How then does God remain just and merciful at the same time? How can God say in Exodus 34 that he "*by no means clears the guilty*" and at the same time in Psalm 103 say, "*He does not deal with us according to our sins; nor repay us according to our iniquities.*" How can God be both just and merciful? The answer is found in Jesus. The answer is found in the cross. Jonah must lead us to see Jesus and the cross.

Hebrews 1 tells us that Jesus is the final revelation of God to us. Do you want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus. Do you want to know how God's justice and mercy meet? Look to Jesus. What do we see when we look to Jesus? We see God in the flesh. We confess in the creed that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary." That is a confession that Jesus is both God and man. Therefore, as our representative, he did what we could not do—he lived in full obedience to God. And so, when he went to the cross he took our place and received the judgment for our sin. Therefore, Paul says of Jesus in Romans 3:26 that God did this so that "*he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" God did not turn a blind eye to our sin. Instead, he sent Jesus to atone for our sin. Therefore, when we turn in faith to Jesus and repent of our sin, God extends his mercy to us and forgives us our sin. One of my favorite descriptions of the cross goes like this: "the cross is the place where God's wrath and mercy meet."

It is interesting to me how Jesus looks back to Jonah. Tim Keller says that there is a direct parallel to the story of Jonah and the story of Jesus when Jesus is in the boat with his disciples and he calms the storm. I never saw all the similarities between the two stories until I read what Keller pointed out about this passage. Keller observes, "Both Jesus and Jonah are in a boat. Both are in storms that are described in similar terms. Both boats are filled with others who are terrified of death. Both groups wake the sleeping prophets angrily, rebuking them. (The disciples cried out to Jesus, "*Teacher, do*

you not care that we are perishing?) Both storms are miraculously calmed and the companions saved. And both stories conclude with the men in the boats more terrified after the storm is stilled than they were before. Every feature is the same—with one rather large apparent exception. Jonah is sacrificed into the storm, thrown into the deep, satisfying the wrath of God so the others will be saved from it—but Jesus is not.”²

But then Keller suggests we not be too hasty in thinking that the comparisons break down at this point. Because it is in Matthew 12:41 that Jesus says, *“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”* Of course, Jesus is alluding to his own death and resurrection for the atonement of our sin. And that is the difference between Jesus and Jonah. Jonah is thrown into “the deep” because of his own sin. Jesus is “thrown into the deep” - the ultimate storm— because of our sin. In doing so, God is both just and merciful. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”* The debt has been paid by Jesus. The mercy of God—the forgiveness of sin—is freely offered to you.

But how do I really know that God will be merciful to me and forgive me of my sin? Well for starters, look at the extent God went to in order to extend his mercy to the people of Ninevah. Jonah tried to runaway in the opposite direction, but God was determined to extend his mercy to the people of this city—and a great fish “Ubered” him right to their doorstep. But we can even go a step further than that in order to be assured that God will be merciful to us if we turn to Jesus and repent of our sin. We have the cross of Jesus. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

Do you ever have your doubts? Do you ever wonder if God’s arms are opened up far enough to include and embrace you? You know your sins. You know those persistent daily and weekly sins that you seem to be confessing time and time again, and so you wonder if God is running out of mercy for you. Or, perhaps you feel as though whatever it is that you have done and the hurt it has caused in others is too big for God to cover with his mercy.

This is why we rehearse the gospel every Sunday when we worship. This is why we regularly celebrate the Lord’s Supper. We need reassured that indeed *“God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”* The Heidelberg Catechism asks this question: “How does the Lord’s Supper remind you and ASSURE you that you share in Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross and in all his gifts?”

Do you know what I like about that question? It assumes we are prone to doubt the mercy of God. It assumes we often wonder whether or not the arms of God are opened wide enough for us. The catechism goes on to say, “As surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup poured out for me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.” Like Jonah, we should be able to say, “*I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*” We have the cross to look at. We have Jesus to look at. Repent—turn from your sin and turn in faith to Jesus—rest in God’s mercy. Anyone and everyone—you and me—who turn to Jesus can know the mercy of God.

Marked By Mercy

Once we taste of God’s mercy, it should mark us. As Jesus says, “*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*” And that is the lesson God is teaching Jonah in this book. Jonah needed to learn what it looks like to be marked by God’s mercy.

When we come to the beginning of chapter 4, we encounter Jonah and he is in a foul mood. It says in verse 1 that “*it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.*” What was it that made Jonah so upset? You would think that something terrible had just happened. And in Jonah’s mind, there was just cause for this anger. In fact, his anger was so intense that he told God to just take his life. It is as if Jonah said in protest, “If this is what is going to happen, may it be done over my dead body.”

We learn in Jonah 3, after initially running away from God’s command to go to Ninevah and his experience with the great fish, that God came to Jonah a second time and He gave him the same command to go to Ninevah and proclaim the message he was given by God. And he did. For three days he walked through the city and gave the people of Ninevah this message. “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” In other words, if you do not repent within forty days, the city will fall. And guess what happened? The people repented. From the greatest to the least of them, they all repented. And so, God had mercy on them.

You would think Jonah would be excited about this revival. I was at a prayer gathering with some pastors this week and as is often the case, the prayer for revival in the Greater Hartford area was a persistent prayer of that gathering. Wouldn’t you love to see what Jonah saw in Ninevah? But it becomes quite clear, from the tone of the story, that Jonah did not want to see the mercy of God applied to the city of Ninevah. Rather, he was

waiting for God to “give it” to them. That is what we see in Jonah 4. In verse 5 it says, “Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.” Do you know what he was looking for? He was looking for fire to rain down from heaven like it did in Sodom and Gomorrah. But it never came.

God comes to Jonah with two questions. These two questions are questions that God uses to expose what is in Jonah’s heart. These questions reveal the very things that cause us to withhold mercy when we are called to extend it.

A Humble View of Self: The first question God asks Jonah is meant to reveal Jonah’s inflated view of himself. He asks Jonah in Jonah 4:4, “*Do you do well to be angry?*” Does Jonah have a right to be angry at God for being merciful to the people and the city of Ninevah? Let’s not forget that this is “prophet of the second chance.” This is the prophet who cried out to God in the belly of a fish. He said in Jonah 2, “*When my life was fainting away; I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple . . . Salvation belongs to the LORD!*” In other words, “Jonah, where would you be without God’s mercy?” The key to being marked by God’s mercy—to being merciful to others—is to constantly remind yourself of your absolute need for mercy. It is the gospel that enables me to have a humble view of myself and to be merciful to others.

Corrie Ten Boom came from a Christian family in Holland who helped many Jews escape from the invading Nazi’s during World War II. As a result, she and her family ended up in concentration camps, but she was the only one to survive. She and her sister were sent to Ravensbruck, where her sister died. Shortly after the war, in 1947, she was speaking in a church in Munich, Germany. She came to her “Assyria”—Germany—with the message that God forgives. She liked to say it this way, “When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.”

When she finished speaking, the people got up and began to exit the room. But she noticed one gentleman making his way through the crowd and coming right for her. She recognized him right away. He was a former guard at the concentration camp. All kinds of emotions began to well up within her.

Reaching out his hand, he said, ‘A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’ . . . “ ‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying, ‘I was a guard there.’ . . . ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did

there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein,' again the hand came out—'will you forgive me?' She said, "I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze . . . "It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do." How does one even show mercy in a case like this? How would she respond to the question God asked Jonah, "*Do you do well to be angry?*" We might quickly come to defense and say, "she sure does."

But listen to what she said. "And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?" It was the awareness of her own sin that enabled her to do what she did. "Help!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.' "And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother!' I cried. 'With all my heart!' For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then"³ That is the power of the gospel.

A Compassion for Others: The second question God asked Jonah comes at the very end of the book, "*You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?*"

While Jonah sat on the hill outside the city to see what God would do, he found shade from the hot sun under a plant. But God caused the plant to wither and so Jonah baked in the hot sun and this just added to his misery and his foul mood. He was more upset about losing the shade—his comfort—than he was upset over the potential destruction of his enemies—living souls created in the image of God.

God looks at these 120,000 people who he created in his image and it moves him to compassion. People matter to God. All people matter to God. So he says to Jonah, "how can you not see the value of these people who don't "*know their right hand from their left.*" In other words, they don't know God. People matter to God and they need to matter to us. Keep before you the fact that everyone you meet is created in the image of God and is of value.

We live in a polarizing world of “us and them.” And whoever the “them” happens to be, they are often devalued in the eyes of the “us.” I cringed this week as a I heard a news commentator refer to the two young men who committed these horrific crimes of mass murder as “worthless souls.” In trying to come up with a reason for their heinous crime he devalued the image of God stamped on their hearts and expressed no compassion.

I can't read Jonah without thinking of the city of Hartford. The population of Hartford is 120,000, just like Nineveh. And yet, so often in the suburbs we look at this city located in the backyard and we fail to look at it with the compassion of Jesus. And yet, I will tell you that I have seen more openness to a need for God in my interactions in the city than I have in the suburbs.

Ask God to help you see people the way God sees people. It is this compassion and mercy that moves us to go! It moves us to love!

Conclusion

Do you know what Jonah knows? God is a merciful God and he has demonstrated his mercy through Jesus! Repent of your sin and turn in faith to Jesus and find forgiveness and peace.

Then let God's mercy mark you and shine through you. Remember to stay humble as you rehearse the gospel and recall your own need for God's mercy. And then, pray that God would open your eyes to see people as God sees them—whoever the “them” happens to be for you. Then go and proclaim the hope and the love of Jesus through word and deed. May God do what he needs to do to shake us out of our comfort until we are marked by his mercy.

¹Philip Ryken *Exodus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005)1041

²Tim Keller *Preaching* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015) Kindle Reader Location 973

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