

The Grace of God vs The Ungrace of Jonah

Luke Bushman, September 24th 2023

The lectionary text this morning had the option of using part of the book of Jonah, which is an opportunity that I snapped at instantly. As someone who is really fascinated by biblical scholarship there are a few books in the Bible that have managed to captivate me in ways far different than others. Jonah is on that list of books that fascinate me. It is only about two pages long, and yet you can find many books, and articles, and a really good VeggieTales movie about it. This is because the book of Jonah is very strange, not just in content, but also when people try to place the genre and meaning of the book. There is a mention of a prophet named Jonah in the book of Kings, so he was a historical figure, but in the story there are no countries named (just cities), and no statement of who is the ruler of what. Typically prophetic texts give at least a little background of who the ruler was at the time, but not in the book of Jonah. It seems to be at odds with itself at times. The cities are real, but the events are fantastical. The humans act as we would expect, but many inanimate objects are given personification and roles. Many people brush aside those who lean towards an allegorical reading of the book as lacking faith, but there is a strong claim based on the writing style that this book is not to be taken as historically accurate. Personally I do not think it matters, because this story- literal or historical fiction- has value to us today. If you are unfamiliar with the story of Jonah, I will quickly recap.

God comes to a prophet named Jonah, and tells him to go and deliver a message to Nineveh. We are not told what this message is. Jonah decides to try running from God, by getting on a boat headed the opposite direction. Jonah goes down into the belly of the ship and takes a nap. He is awakened when a horrible storm breaks out, and himself and the crew decide with the help of casting lots that it is because he has wronged God by running. Instead of trying to commit to doing the right thing, Jonah decides he would rather be thrown overboard, than go to Nineveh as he was asked. Jonah is then swallowed by a fish where he stays for three days and nights, before being vomited back onto the land. He travels into the center of Nineveh where he delivers a message. The message Jonah gives is far from convincing- in Hebrew it is five words long. In English it is

a whopping eight words long. I wish my sermons could be that short. All Jonah says is “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown”. The King of Nineveh orders that everyone repent, and adopts typical Israelite repentance practices of sackcloth and ashes, and even goes a step further by ordering that the animals participate in this repentance practice.

That is the story up until the final chapter. Jonah begrudgingly, and at times unwillingly makes his way to Nineveh to deliver a message from God, which the Ninevites take to heart. Jonah’s reluctance to go to Nineveh makes sense. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians are not spoken about kindly in the biblical books around the book of Jonah. In fact, just in history as a whole, the Assyrians were viewed as a merciless and violent kingdom. Of course all kingdoms were violent, Israel’s included, but the Assyrians managed to stand out in history as exceptionally ruthless. Jonah eventually is forced through wild events to go and deliver God’s message. And then we arrive at the ending which was read this morning.

Jonah goes up to watch the termination of the Ninevites, and then he gets upset at God. What is Jonah mad at? In fact so angry that he says he may as well just be dead. He is so angry he wants to die. “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now LORD take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live”. Jonah is mad at God for being too compassionate, too gracious, too loving. Jonah lists these qualities of God as if they are negatives, and is throwing a temper tantrum that God is not as ruthless as Jonah would like them to be.

This is not the first time in the book that Jonah would rather die than be confronted by the graciousness of God. Earlier on, while a boat of other people is sinking, Jonah asks to be thrown overboard and into the depths rather than repent and be on God’s mission for grace. **Having failed to escape the presence of Yahweh through flight to Tarshish, sleep in the innards of the ship, death at the sea or in the belly of the fish, Jonah is this time direct, not devious, in stating his wish. Jonah 4:2 .** Here again Jonah wants to avoid the grace of God, and would rather be dead than faced with the reality that God wants to extend grace to his enemies.

God then has mercy on Jonah. While Jonah is watching, eating popcorn, sadistically waiting for the Ninevites to be killed, God “appoints a plant” (an example of personification in the story), to grow and give Jonah shade. When the plant dies, Jonah is upset and repeats the sentiment that it would be better if he was dead.

The story ends suddenly, with a final speech from God, asking Jonah why he feels entitled to be upset about a plant dying, but does not think it is fair for God to have mercy on a whole city of people. I mentioned before that there is a VeggieTales movie about Jonah, and they take obviously a ton of liberties with the story, but one thing I love about that movie is that they really highlight how abrupt this ending is. The VeggieTales edition of the story, is told by three narrators telling a stranded group of travelers a story. When they finish the story, Bob the Tomato says “That’s it!?”. There is no real conclusion, no resolution where Jonah becomes more merciful, or where God fulfills Jonah’s wishes. The story just ends. I think they leave the ending inconclusive so that we as readers are left wondering. Inconclusive endings invite more questions for us to ponder. When I read this book, I find Jonah to be an annoying, whiny, mean character. In “What’s So Amazing About Grace” Philip Yancey regularly discusses not only grace, but ungrace. The lack of grace in our world is at times astounding. Jonah seems to be a hyperbolic example of what it looks like to hate grace. He is a ridiculous character, throwing tantrums, wishing he was dead, and eagerly awaiting the destruction of the Ninevites. Perhaps the character of Jonah serves as an example of what we would be like if we hated the grace of God. Or some may argue that this book tries to prod at the relationship between Justice and Grace. Jonah represents a craving for justice, and God is a perfect example of grace. Jonah wants the enemies of his people destroyed, and God wants to give second chances to everyone in the story- Jonah and the Ninevites alike. The dialogue between God and Jonah, reminds me of a similar tension that I feel when trying to grapple with God’s amazing grace, and my craving for justice and vindication. I believe the two ideas coexist somehow, but if I am being honest, I do not always understand how they can. I feel a lot of conflict in my heart when I see those who hurt others, forgiven and accepted into the community, while

those on the receiving end of their actions have a long road of healing ahead of them.

I wonder if the original readers of Jonah felt a similar conflict in their hearts. The Ninevites had caused so much pain. Taking over Israel, exiling people, splitting up families, and murdering people. Like Jonah they would have identified God as gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love, and relenting from sending calamity. Based on the history of Nineveh tormenting the Hebrew people, Jonah's wish for destruction doesn't seem that unusual.

And so here we are today, as human beings still trying to figure out how grace and justice coexist. I, like the book of Jonah, am going to end this sermon open ended. Inconclusive. I think the book of Jonah prompts us to wrestle with the big questions in our world, to acknowledge that grace isn't always a simple concept. We know that God is gracious, but we don't always acknowledge that grace is difficult. I would love it if forgiveness was a simple "I am sorry" and everything goes back to normal. That doesn't seem to be the case. There are factors like consequences for actions, protection of victims, condemning patterns of abuse, and so many other things that come along with our pursuit of grace. I think the grace of God, and their love for justice must just be one of those great mysteries of the universe. Something I believe in, hope for, and pursue, regardless of if I fully understand. I believe God wants to be gracious, and that is enough for me to try and do the same.