

WHAT'S RIGHT WITH JONAH'S ANGER  
Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
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Jonah, chapters 3 & 4

*Let us begin with prayer:*

*Bless us, O God, with a reverent sense of your presence that we may be at peace and worship you with all our mind and spirit. Amen*

If you closed your eyes and listened to the first scripture reading this morning, with no idea of what chapter or verse it came from, there would only be one very small clue that this wasn't the beginning of Jonah's story. Jonah chapter three starts Jonah's call again at the very beginning, but with that one qualifier that tells us there is more to the story than what we are about to hear: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time* saying..." The last time Jonah heard the word of the Lord, he had a radically different response: you remember, he fled away from God's presence on a ship, God sent a storm upon the sea, the ship was almost destroyed, Jonah convinced the sailors to throw him overboard so they would be saved, Jonah was swallowed by a big fish, Jonah prayed to God and promised to uphold his vows, the big fish spit Jonah out onto the dry land.

So when we hear that "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you,'" everyone is expecting a different response from Jonah, and we are not disappointed when we hear: "So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord." Even though Jonah's journey has become a template for the unexpected, the amazing response of the Ninevites, from king to cow, is truly more than what was expected.

Nineveh was not just a great city, it was a city that exemplified the heart of the Assyrian Empire. Nineveh was located in present day Mosul, in Iraq. Its fame came from being the capital of Assyria under the great King Sennacherib. He is the king who invaded Judah and scattered the tribes of Israel, and he was poised to topple Jerusalem as well, but according to the 2 Kings, the Lord destroyed his army overnight and he was forced to return to Nineveh.<sup>1</sup> The Assyrians were a superpower in their time, and they were no friend to the Israelites. Nineveh may sound like a faraway land to our ear, but to the ancient listener, the mere mention of this nation's capital city must have conjured up a host of unpleasant feelings.

Given this historically charged relationship with the Israelites and their Lord, what happens in chapter three of the book of Jonah is jaw-dropping. It is simple, but it is amazing. The people of Nineveh believed Jonah when he proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." They all believed him. Everyone. Great and small. King and pauper, herd and flock, down to the last living thing, they did not eat, they did not drink water. They covered themselves in sackcloth and cried out to God, and God turned away from the anger promised, God relented and did not destroy the city. How delighted Jonah must be! Imagine a prophet with the power to convey a message with such clarity that people listen, and then they are rewarded. Jonah will be a hero! Jonah will be remembered forever as the greatest prophet, a voice who could even compel the people who are the essence of another powerful culture to follow God...but then we read on.

"But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." Whatever Jonah learned in the belly of the big fish, he did not lose his humanity, for what could be more human than not

wanting to see your enemies forgiven by your God? Jonah is stomping mad about this turn of events:

Jonah 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.’”

Finally, we get a glimpse of why Jonah responded the way he did to the first call to go to Nineveh, and the reason for his disobedience transforms Jonah from person who simply does not want to obey God’s call to a prophet with a competing idea of who deserves forgiveness. If we are honest, we can admit that we understand what Jonah is feeling; we crave God’s compassion for ourselves but we are not so eager to see that compassion shared with those whom we think are undeserving. As ridiculous as Jonah sounds, being angry about God’s compassion, we understand where he is coming from.

Prophets, by nature of their work, have an intimate relationship with anger. Prophets are often the bearers of news to the people that God’s anger is mounting and a change of course is needed to prevent the divine wrath. The biblical scholar Abraham Heschel points out, though, that it is always God’s love that is described as going on forever, never God’s anger and that “the prophets never speak of an angry God as if anger were [God’s] disposition.”<sup>2</sup> Heschel talks about the idea of “divine patience” as being as much a part of the biblical landscape as “divine wrath.”<sup>3</sup> And, it is the divine patience expressed in the slowness of God’s anger that provides the opportunity for change.

For example, it is the divine patience that gives the people of Nineveh forty days to respond to the threat against their city; and within that patience they are motivated to behave differently. A patient God is a good companion for human beings. Our desire to be sinners in the hands of a patient God is understandable. Nobody wants God’s wrath turned toward them and nobody wants to think their God has potential to harm in the ways we know anger can.

Jonah turns the prophetic tables though, and he is suddenly a whole new kind of prophet, speaking not about God’s potential anger, but expressing his own anger in no uncertain terms. Anger’s raw, sometimes even reckless nature, has made it an emotion which our faith can mistakenly teach us must be suppressed under all circumstances. So, we are more than a little worried for Jonah when he directs his anger at God. Not unlike his hasty decision to try and flee from the presence of the Lord, getting angry with the Lord seems even less advisable. We are torn between wanting to avert our eyes and gawking at the situation that is unfolding before us. God’s change of mind from anger to compassion at the Ninevites may benefit Jonah in this situation, for in Jonah’s anger he encounters a patient, almost playful God.

Jonah is so upset with the whole situation he says what he seems to have been feeling through this whole ordeal, “please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” If Jonah’s request sounds a little too much like a flare for the dramatic to you, let’s take his side for minute. Being a prophet it not an easy job. There is a lot of traveling, and a lot of breaking bad news to people. You never know how people are going to respond, and if you are going to have to repeat yourself over and over again if they don’t listen. Prophets were also judged by the proof of their prophecies, so a situation like what happened in Nineveh isn’t the best situation for a prophet’s credibility. How do the people of Nineveh know that they are saved because of a change of heart by God? Could they also draw the conclusion that there was never any threat to begin with? Either way, Jonah’s words of the city’s destruction are deflated.

Part of what makes Jonah's anger so real is its complexity. Jonah's not just mad about God's compassion, Jonah's mad about going to Nineveh in the first place! Despite those three days in the belly of the big fish, despite his eloquent prayer ending with a voice of thanksgiving, even though he probably told himself a million times on the way to Nineveh not to get mad if God forgives them, there he is stomping his foot and shaking his fist, sounding like an idiot who doesn't want a forgiving God, flush with the realization that God was always going to do what God wanted in Nineveh anyway. Jonah is feeling hurt and used. And isn't that the way with anger? The past is always running hand in hand with it, things we thought we had let go of are front and center with anger in the blink of an eye.

God's skills to deescalate conflict seem a little rusty in this narrative. I don't know what your experience with anger is, but I can't imagine being asked "Is it right for you to be angry?" being a very effective way to get me to step back from my anger. Jonah to his credit walks away, far away. He goes outside of Nineveh and sits down east of the city. What happens next is an analogy about compassion, but it has the feel of being a test of Jonah's ability to feel compassion. God is once again active in nature and causes first a bush to grow over Jonah and bring him shade and happiness.

Then God sends a worm to eat the bush and a "sultry" wind the warm sun to beat down on Jonah, who becomes more convinced than ever that it is better for him to die than to live.

Again God asks Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?" and Jonah replies this time, "Yes, angry enough to die." At which point God makes the case for why Nineveh and the people and animals in it were worth saving, because God created them and therefore God cared about them. The last words in the book of Jonah are God's. The book ends with a cliffhanger; we never hear Jonah's response and God's explanation for saving the people of Nineveh. God's pleading tone seems to be saying to Jonah, "Don't you get it?"

This question, "is it right for you to be angry?" is a leading question. It leaves us wondering what's wrong with Jonah's anger, because it is obviously not quite right for him to be so angry. The mistake we must not make is thinking that Jonah's anger is wrong just because it is anger. There is a connection with compassion in this narrative that may tell us what is right with Jonah's anger.

The Psalmist asks a question about this connection between anger and compassion in Psalm 77:9, when the Psalmist says, "Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has God in anger shut up her compassion?" In the Jonah's story, God's anger and compassion work together for good for the Ninevites. When all those living in Nineveh repent, God is able to let go of the divine anger and let compassion come in. That change is not easy. It sounds easy, but in fact letting go of our anger is very hard. God's anger has not shut up his compassion, and God is trying to remind Jonah of the need to make room within his anger for a little compassion to come in.

What's right with Jonah's anger is that it makes him present in his relationship with God. If he did not care, if he was only interested in doing what he was told, if he didn't have compassion for his own people, he would likely not be able to muster so much anger at his forgiving God. What's wrong with Jonah's anger is that it has become wrapped too tight around him. Jonah is capable of feeling compassion through his anger, he shows that with the happiness he gets from the plant's shade, but, he does not want to let that compassion in. Like most of us, he is more comfortable surrounded by the walls of anger than the vulnerability of compassion. By reminding Jonah that he cared for the plant, God is reminding Jonah that no matter how intense our anger, there can still be room for compassion.

What it takes to make room for compassion in our anger is difficult to pinpoint. Anger is different for each of us, and different situations conjure up different expressions of anger. The good news is this: we are in relationship with a God who knows what it is to be angry and yet who does not let that anger shut out compassion. We do not have to strive not to be angry; we have to strive to be present with God in our anger. We have to strive to be present with God in our frustration, in our changes of heart and mind, and in our compassion. We are witnessed to by our God, who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. What's right with our anger is that we have a God who we can shout out our frustrations to. What's right with our anger is that we have a God who we cannot run away from. What's right with our anger is that we have a God who is willing to let go of being right and show us what it means to let compassion change our minds.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2005/09/Iraq-and-the-Bible.aspx](http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2005/09/Iraq-and-the-Bible.aspx) accessed on 8/13/2008.

<sup>2</sup> Heschel, Abraham J. The Prophets, volume II. (Harper Torchbooks, New York: 1962) p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 65.