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# MADDENING MERCY

JONAH 3:1-5, 10

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL  
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Jonah is having some pretty rough days and he's mad as heck. Have you ever had one of those days? Have you ever had one of those seasons? Mad at everything? Mad at circumstances? Mad at people? Mad at life? Mad at God? Well, Jonah is super duper mad.

Mad because God commands him a first and second time "to go to Nineveh, the great city." This was unthinkable to an Israelite like Jonah. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and held the southern kingdom of Judah as a subject for almost one hundred years. Assyria was a foreign brutalizing enemy of his people. His loved ones and college buddies died because of Nineveh. Nineveh was a social virus to Jonah, so why in the world would he not keep his social distance from this virus? Why in the world would he go into enemy territory?

Jonah was so opposed to this call of God that he "sets out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" as if he can get away from God, as if we can get away from God. He gets on a ship heading to Tarshish and on that trip a "mighty storm" starts that causes stormy seas, mirroring the storm raging in his own life. The other men on the ship find out the storm is happening because God is upset at Jonah so they throw Jonah overboard into the sea to calm the seas as Jonah instructed them. And when he's thrown overboard, "the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." It was as if he had three strikes against him and he was out.

All of this happened because Jonah didn't want to go to his enemy and pronounce God's word to them. But as they say, Jonah could run but he couldn't hide. Poet Jan Richardson said Jonah tried "to put an ocean between [himself] and what [God] asks," which is what we do sometimes. But no ocean, no mountain, no valley, no fear, no violence, no political affiliation, will stop what God wants to accomplish. Jonah wants *his* will to be done rather than have his plans undone.

Jonah is so mad, not at Nineveh, but at God because God acts in ways he never approved.

He didn't want to have anything to do with God's call and ultimately God's character. Eventually, the large fish spewed Jonah out and God tells Jonah again to go to Nineveh and proclaim that they will be overthrown. This time, Jonah does it and guess what? The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast and everyone put on sackcloth. They repented. And "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." This should have been a good reason to throw a hallelujah party as the choir tunes up amazing grace how sweet the sound and how the lost were found. One commentator even says, "[Jonah] should be headed for the evangelism hall of fame."

Instead, this whole situation drives Jonah insane. He's mad as heck. He wished that he could handle the situation in the way he thought it should be handled. Have you ever been there? The NRSV says God not punishing Nineveh "was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry" (4:1). But the Hebrew reads more shockingly and says, "it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned." Jonah was so mad at God, so mad at grace, that he believes grace is evil. He tells God that he fled to Tarshish "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" (4:2). I knew that you would treat my devilish enemy the same way you treat me and I'm ticked. Jonah is furious at God because God acts in ways he doesn't approve. Jonah is mad at God's mercy even though he himself experienced it in the form of a large fish that saved him from drowning at sea. God doesn't do what Jonah thinks God should do to Nineveh and he's mad to the bone about it. If he were God, the enemy Ninevites would have been wiped out a long time ago and

given the death penalty. No just mercy for Jonah. Nothing would have pleased Jonah more than to see them get what he thought they deserved. If Jonah were God, I'd be afraid for the future of grace.

Jonah was mad at God's mercy. He wanted an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

He, like many of us, prefers retribution and revenge. So often, we prefer seeing others die for their wrongdoing than seeing *them* live. Them, our enemies. Them, those we consider evil. "I fled to Tarshish for I knew that you are a gracious God." How mad do you have to be in order to flee from grace? A grace that shows mercy to the merciless, to destructive, devious human beings. If we were God, we would destroy those who destroy property and people. We'd kill those who kill. We'd hate those who hate. But God's blessing "swims in grace" (Jan Richardson). And this makes Jonah so mad.

I never understood why God doesn't do what I always want. Jonah's story reminds us that God will do what God wants to do to whom God wants to do it when God wants to do it, without our consultation, because God is free. And this can be so maddening. Jonah nor we can control God and who are the recipients of God's mercy. Sometimes, we can get this confused in divinity schools and seminaries where students get Master of Divinity degrees which may cause some to think that they are the master of divinity when they should be mastered by divinity.

If one doesn't know this by now, you might have some rough days like Jonah when you realize that your concepts of God—who you think God is and what you think God does—are not the same thing as God. Your theology of God is not God. Your interpretations of the word of God are not God. The way we do church or the patterns and styles of worship we use are not God. What we want God to be or hope God to be is not God. God is God all by Godself and God is free from our thoughts and desires about who we want God to be and this makes Jonah so mad, angry enough that he prefers to die. He can't stand to see God be so gracious and spare the life of the Ninevites. "It is better for me to die than to live."

The real problem is that Jonah can't stand grace unless it's grace extended to him! He can't stand God's grace unless it's on his terms. So, he'd rather die than see God drench compassion and pour mercy on his enemy. He'd rather die than see his enemy alive. But remember as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his book *Strength to Love* (as I mentioned last Sunday), "there's some good in the worst of us, and some evil in the best of us." Jonah can't handle how God forgives and loves and how even our worst enemies or those we consider evil or those on a different political or ideological spectrum are never out of the reach of God's mercy. Never. If we were God, I'd be afraid for the future of grace.

At the end of the story, Jonah is still mad as heck. But even in his anger, God is still present with grace and engages him. When things don't work out how we desire or imagine, we may get angry with God because God is not like us and God's ways are not our ways. Clearly, at the end, there are no cozy warm feelings oozing from Jonah toward God. He's going to bed mad. Yet God is still consistent, the same God with the same attributes that Israel always depended on for its own salvation (Exodus 34:6-7)—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. This is the God for mad Jonah. This is the God for evil Nineveh. This is the God for us, whoever we are.

And this is the God who calls us not to just go to Nineveh but to extend mercy to those we think don't deserve it, even our worst enemies. God calls us to do some things we would never choose to do on our own and we may get mad about it. But this is a call and challenge to put aside our supposed moral superiority and put on God's character of boundless mercy in the days ahead in a society that is greatly divided. Mercy extends to all.

"Mercy there was great and grace was free, pardon there was multiplied to me, there my burden soul found liberty, at Calvary." One of my former teaching assistants when I was a seminary student, who's now a professor, testifies that her father "always told [her] that if [she] did not believe that God would save the most foul of humans, then [she] did not really believe in God's power to save [her] own soul"(Beth Tanner). "If grace is an ocean, we're all sinking," floating in God's grace—Jonah, Nineveh, you, me, and even that large fish. Amen.