Jonah 4

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. So he 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. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”
[In character as Jonah]

It is finished. I’ve done my part. It’s up to God now. I shared with Nineveh the word he gave me: “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” But why even give them forty days? They’re pagans! They worship idols—lifeless hunks of metal. What does he expect them to do…repent to a God they don’t even know? What could be more ridiculous?

Their destruction should be coming any minute now. Do they have any idea what the Almighty has in store for them? Their city, Nineveh, that great city, will be reduced to ash when he rains down fire upon them. Their king may throw ash upon himself as a sign of repentance, but soon he will be drowning in ash. They all will. Their temples, their marketplaces, their homes—all will fall. There will not be a stone left to build upon. A great cloud of ash will block out the sun. They will choke on the dust when they try to speak. Their very tears will turn black. Then they will learn what it means to fear the Lord. Then they will learn the words that I, the Lord’s prophet, spoke were true. I must find a high vantage point east of the city to watch.

Why does my God delay? Where are the peels of thunder? All I hear is their incessant wailing. So much noise! Just listen to them, as if they knew the meaning of the word “repentance.” They cry out. They beat their chests. They fast and put on sackcloth, humans and even animals! What a ridiculous display! Can a sheep “repent” for its sins? Can a pagan? I suppose one is as likely as the other. Do they really think that the Holy One of Israel listens to their bleating? Their prayers cannot reach the Lord who sits upon his throne in the temple in Jerusalem, the holy city. The Lord listens only to those whom he loves. He is indifferent to their cries. The Day of the Lord will surely come upon them. Soon. Very soon.
Why, Lord, do you delay in unleashing your righteous anger? Let them know your wrath! They are your enemies! You are their enemy, are you not? So why do you wait? Surely, they do not deserve mercy? If you were to show them mercy, if you spare their city from destruction, then you make me a liar. My words will fall to the ground like so many dead leaves. What good is the prophet whose prophecy does not come true? No, I would rather die than see that happen! If you spare them, do not spare me, but take my life now. [End of soliloquy]

Thank you for indulging me in that dramatic monologue. That was not something I initially planned on doing. When I sat down to write this sermon I really struggled with finding an appropriate sermon illustration. Jonah’s words and emotions in chapter four are so melodramatic that I couldn’t find a fitting example to compare them with. So I decided that the best way into the scripture passage was through the voice of Jonah himself.

Poor Jonah! He really is melodramatic. He would rather die than see God, in his mercy, spare the people of Nineveh. He would rather see his prophetic words of doom to Nineveh come true than see God relent and extend grace and mercy to an undeserving foreign people.

Up to this point in the story Jonah has been easy to relate to. This is one of the appealing aspects of the book of Jonah: Jonah, even though he is a prophet of the Lord, is so flawed, so human. Because of that, we can see some of ourselves in him. Like Jonah, we often run from God and what God calls us to do, especially when God wants to send us somewhere we don’t want to go. Like Jonah, when we flee from God we make a mess of things and end up inflicting unnecessary pain and misery upon ourselves. Like Jonah, we cry out to God in the pit of our despair, asking God to save us. Like Jonah, through the grace of God we are given a second chance to do what God asks of us.

But here in chapter four Jonah seems a little bit less relatable. His flaws are more pronounced and less endearing. Rather than being his own worst enemy, as he was
in chapter one when he fled from God, in chapter four he considers Nineveh to be the enemy. He wants God to be faithful to his word and destroy the enemies of Israel. When God shows mercy and does not destroy Nineveh, Jonah gets annoyed. He becomes angry [SLIDE]:

“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. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jon. 4:2).

Jonah would rather die than see Nineveh spared. In fact, that is why he fled to Tarshish in the first place, he now claims. He feared that God would be merciful, for that would be in keeping with God’s character. Jonah’s words reflect Israel’s understanding of God. In fact, Jonah is almost quoting from Exodus 34, in which God appears to Moses, saying of himself [SLIDE]:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin…” (Ex. 34:6-7).

The Lord may be slow to anger, but not so Jonah. He is angry that God has shown himself to be what Jonah knew him to be, i.e., gracious. Jonah’s anger is, of course, a misplaced anger, and God tries to teach Jonah this by asking him, “Is it right for you to be angry?” (Jon. 4:4). It is a direct question. Sometimes in the Bible we see this sort of direct question from God [SLIDE]. At the end of the book of Job, God confronts Job with a litany of questions. And after Jesus has been resurrected, he asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” It’s the kind of question that causes a person to look
inward, to be introspective. Here God is asking Jonah to examine his own anger. “Is it right for you to be angry?” In other words, Is your anger justified? What’s so annoying about my grace?

Jonah, however, is not in any mood to be introspective. Not only does he not answer God’s question, he flees, yet again. He leaves Nineveh and goes east of the city, waiting to see what will become of it. Perhaps God will again change his mind, he may be thinking. It’s hard to say because Jonah’s actions now are inexplicable. They don’t make much sense. He has been rescued by God and given a second chance, but still Jonah shows that he has learned almost nothing from his experience.

Yet God will not give up on Jonah. In reading through the book of Jonah for this sermon series, this has been the most surprising and interesting thing for me. It’s not that Jonah is swallowed by a fish. Yes, that grabs our attention. If this were a news story, I’m sure that would be the headline. But when you go deeper—as in to the depths of the sea where God’s saving grace found Jonah—you realize that despite Jonah’s repeated attempts to flee, God continues to pursue his wandering prophet.

Even when Jonah flees a second time, God’s grace finds him again. True, Jonah may not perceive the Lord’s intervention in his life as grace; nonetheless, that is what it is [SLIDE]. You may remember in chapter one how God “provided” the fish to swallow Jonah. We see that same Hebrew verb three times in the next paragraph. Here it is translated as “appointed.” God appoints a bush to give Jonah shade from the scorching sun. God then appoints a worm to eat the bush and deprive Jonah of the shade. Finally, God appoints a sultry east wind that, when combined with the heat of the sun, makes Jonah feel faint.

This upsets Jonah so much that he again declares, “It is better for me to die than to live” (Jon. 4:8). Wait, what? Because he has lost the bush that provided him with shade he is ready to die? Jonah has lost all perspective. He is like someone who gets a papercut and demands to be taken to the emergency room. I’m dying here! Call the ambulance! We may want to laugh at Jonah, but it ought to be an uneasy
laughter because we should see some of ourselves in Jonah’s overreaction. Why should he be given that promotion instead of me? I worked just as hard—harder even. There’s no justice in this world! Why was she born with so many advantages while I have none? It’s not fair! I hate my life! My child spent all week writing that essay only to get a B+? What’s wrong with that teacher? I need to have a talk with her.

Jonah is not alone in his overreaction. God tries to bring him out of his delusion by again asking him, “Is it right for you to be angry...?” (Jon. 4:9). Jonah responds with a defiant, “Yes, angry enough to die.” These are the final words we hear from Jonah in the book that bears his name. They are not exactly heroic, are they? That’s because Jonah is not the hero of this story; he is the antihero. The Bible doesn’t present Jonah as a hero to be emulated. The Bible is not telling us to be like Jonah; it’s telling us that we are like Jonah [SLIDE]. It is not being prescriptive, telling us what to do; it is being descriptive, telling us who we are. The Bible doesn’t so much give us a window into Jonah’s life as it holds a mirror up to our own lives.

The question that God asks Jonah God also asks us: Is it right for you to be angry because I have shown grace to someone who didn’t deserve it? Is it right for you to be annoyed by my loving kindness? Have I not shown you the same grace, mercy, and love?

Jonah is blind to this truth. Long before God extended grace to Nineveh, God had extended grace to Jonah. God saved his life, rescuing him from a watery grave. God listened to his prayer. God gave him a second chance. But Jonah is unable to see this. He sees only God’s unfair treatment of the Ninehvitites. They are recipients of a grace they do not deserve. They are not members of the Covenant. They are not Israelites. They are foreigners. They are enemies. They do not deserve grace. And this annoys Jonah. It annoys him so much that he eventually confesses that this is why he fled to Tarshish. He knew that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing [SLIDE].
Jonah would rather that God were more like himself: merciless, quick to anger, abounding in judgment, and showing no pity. Jonah wants a god created in his image. Jonah would like God to be confined to categories that Jonah can understand. God should reside in the temple in Israel. God should be the god of Israel, not of Israel’s enemies. God should behave in ways that are predictable, understandable, and that don’t cause annoyance. This is a god who would fit neatly into a little box of Jonah’s creation. This God is convenient and controllable and oh-so-easy to worship because he looks so much like ourselves. And that is the fundamental sin in which every other sin has its origin—the worship of ourselves rather than God.

When we create a god in our image we do as Paul says in Romans 1, i.e., we worship created things and not the Creator. We worship a form of ourselves. We do this as individuals and we even do this within society. Americans are very adept at this. In some churches in America you would get the distinct impression that God is a capitalist, a supporter of American foreign policy, and—well—American. But don’t kid yourselves—Koreans do this, too.

Of course, this idolatrous god is not the God we encounter in scripture. It is not the God who commands, pursues, rescues, redeems, and confronts Jonah. It is not the God whose grace is wild and untamed by human expectations.

I said in the first sermon of this series that the book of Jonah is not so much about Jonah as it is about God. It is God, not Jonah, who has the first and the last word in the book that bears Jonah’s name. The word of the Lord sets the plot in motion, as Jonah is commanded to bring God’s word to a foreign people—those undeserving Ninehvitens. And it is the word of the Lord that closes the book, as God provides for Jonah one last time. This time it’s nothing physical that God provides; it’s not a fish, a tree, a worm, or a wind. This time God provides Jonah with some perspective, saying [SLIDE]:

“You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great
city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jon. 4:10-11).

As the owner of two adorable dogs, I have to confess that it warms my heart to read that God is also concerned about the animals of Nineveh. So high and deep and wide and great is the love of God that even animals fall within its embrace. So too does Jonah, that faithless servant of the Lord, the one whom God pursues, rescues, and will not give up on. So too do the Ninevites, those strangers to God, those people who did not and could not begin to earn the grace of God but who nevertheless repent. And so, too, do we, who share quite a few similarities with both Jonah and with the Ninevites. Although we are faithless and undeserving, we, too, are recipients of God’s at times annoying, but always amazing, grace.