

August 20th: Nineveh, part two

Today we continue our journey together into the story of Jonah. I've mentioned the past few weeks that as we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together. So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

You've had some great guest preachers in my absence, I hope they gave you some insight into this story that resonated with you and your own journey of faith. If their words spoke to you, please be sure to share those affirmations with them! Today we come back to Jonah chapter 3 and Jonah's time in the city of Nineveh. Before we get started, would you join me in prayer?

Loving God, we come here this morning as recipients of your abundant grace, we come to remind ourselves of our inherent worth in your eyes. You have called to us from the depths of our despair, you have rescued us from the pits, you have brought us to safer, more stable shores. Today we also remember that you do the same for others—even others that we might consider to be unworthy or

unlovable. Today we remind ourselves that your love for creation has no boundaries or conditions—it is offered freely to everyone, and we don't have control over who is able to accept it or who is welcomed by you. So with that expansive love in mind, we come into your presence ready to be convicted, ready to be inspired, ready to be sent out into the world as agents of reconciliation. In your name we pray, amen.

After my last sermon, I've been thinking a lot about enemies.

That might not sound like a very relaxing concept for my summer vacation—and you're right—it was not very relaxing to think about. But in this case, it was necessary—not only because of this meditation that I needed to prepare upon my return, but also because I realized that our current culture is very much divided, and hostility has seemed to infiltrate even the most mundane aspects of our daily interactions—and it seemed to me that this negativity has reached a boiling point. And I confess that I've gotten caught up in this too. I think if you had asked me a few weeks ago if I had any enemies, I would have said no, of course I don't. Maybe I would have said someone long dead like Osama bin Laden or Ted Bundy, but I wouldn't have thought about living, breathing enemies. Now, I'm not so sure.

I think in our cultural imagination, enemies are an abstract concept for many of us—someone or something that is somehow removed from our routine, but still presents some danger. I think that this abstract idea of enemies has largely been shaped by our history of overseas conflicts, where the battlefields are time zones and continents away from our calm residential streets, and only a select few have direct contact with the resulting violence and trauma of war. We send money and troops *over there*, away from our commutes and peaceful neighborhoods, and while we might watch the nightly news, we aren't in constant contact with the reality of having and being an enemy to someone else. Our typical enemies are unknown to us—leaders or figures who we recognize by name, but never have to pass on the street. We might remember their bad deeds, but we might also be removed from the effects of these

deeds—but most of the time, don't know anyone who was personally a victim or personally impacted.

But I wonder if that's not the full picture.

You see, I think we do have enemies—either real or imagined—much closer to home. We may still have these abstract enemies around the globe, but I think the cultural narratives at play in our current climate have made us actively hostile towards each other in distinct and tangible ways. Whether it's our political opponents, the driver who cuts us off in traffic, the coworker who microwaves fish in the communal kitchen, or the family member who drives us insane—we do have these feelings of anger and maybe even hatred that we haven't quite been able to diffuse. And while we might not typically categorize these feelings as worthy of the label of “enemy,” we are still actively engaging in behavior that effectively cuts us off from others that we dislike, disagree with, or otherwise don't want to associate with. We might not see each other as “enemies,” but sometimes that's definitely how we treat each other. Even the most well-intentioned of us can respond to everyday stresses and frustrations in ways that create disharmony and conflict—we yell at the bad driver, we pick a fight with our spouse, we send a rude email to that colleague—it all compounds in a way that creates strife rather than peace.

But what does this have to do with Jonah?

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, Jonah has some very good reasons for being hesitant to serve as God's prophet to the Ninevites. During Jonah's lifetime, Nineveh was a powerful city, and at one point it was the capital of the fearsome Assyrian Empire—a city built by brutal military campaigns, the destruction of foreign lands, and the colonization of oppressed peoples.

In Jonah's homeland, the Ninevites were clearly enemies—enemies of their kingdom, enemies of their culture, enemies of their religion, enemies of their whole existence. The Assyrians threaten everything they hold dear, and so much of our Old Testament has strong words of condemnation for Nineveh

and its residents. And Jonah himself brings a message of destruction—he promises the city of Nineveh that unless they repent of their evil deeds, the God of the Israelites will bring about their downfall. In the middle of the city, Jonah tells a crowd of Ninevites that unless they change, God will overthrow their empire in forty days. He stands in front of the people who have been his adversaries, and he prophesies their doom.

However, you might remember that something curious happens next. Everyone in Nineveh, from the common peasants to the King, begins to fast and repent. As a result of this, chapter 3 verse 10 says, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.”

And that causes a little bit of a spiritual breakdown for our prophet.

Here are the questions that I posed a few weeks ago when we first looked at this unexpected ending:

Isn't this the Nineveh that Isaiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah prophesied would fall in a blaze of divine annihilation?

Aren't these the enemies that Jonah's contemporaries would like to see massacred as justice for what had been done to God's people?

Why in the world would there be forgiveness for these ancient adversaries who had caused so much harm and lived their lives with so much brutality?

Why would Jonah's text have a message that contradicts the writings of his fellow prophets?

If we're being honest, this story might cause a little bit of a spiritual breakdown for us as well.

In a community or a nation or a global society where we treat each other with contempt or suspicion or animosity, we tend to operate more like Jonah than we do like God. We want our enemies, both foreign and domestic, to be punished, don't we? We want to live in a world where justice means that the

evil and the corrupt and the bad drivers are given their fair retribution, right? We want to see our political adversaries dealt with in a way that we think is lawful and right, and we feel cheated in some way if they don't.

But what happens when God has different plans for our enemies than we do?

Now, I'm not saying that all negative emotions or expressions of anger are wrong—anger toward systemic injustice is expected and valid, as in anger towards situations like betrayal, locking your keys in the car at the most inopportune moment, or stubbing your toe on your way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. And I'm not saying that wanting justice for the oppressed is a bad thing, we see in the rest of scripture that God continually fights for the marginalized and supports the less fortunate. I'm not claiming that all forms of punishment are inherently inappropriate either—but I am saying that Jonah's story could show us that God's idea of justice may not always align with our own.

Even when we recognize this discrepancy between our human ways of thinking and God's actions, I still think it's tough to hold Jonah's text in tension with his Old Testament contemporaries, who clearly expected that Nineveh would be destroyed. But I also think that other parts of our Bible can speak into Jonah's story and possibly answer some of the questions that we might have as a result of this confusing story.

Within the spiritual framework of Christianity, Christians often look to Jesus as the most important example of how we are supposed to act. And Jesus says more than once that the two most important things we can do as his followers are to love God and love our neighbors. But what happens when it's your neighbors that are your enemies? How are we supposed to act when it's the people in close proximity that we struggle with loving?

Earlier this year, we read a few pieces of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—his most significant moment of public preaching. In this sermon, Jesus clearly lays out his priorities for his fledgling movement and his new followers, and he offers

them a challenge: the Kingdom of God is totally different from the ways of our human world. In the first chapter of this message, he says to the gathered crowd:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This is a complicated teaching, is it not? It might sound good on paper, but I think even Jesus knew that loving our enemies, in whatever form they take, is much more difficult than it sounds. It’s not something that comes naturally to us, but if we try, if we are disciplined and intentional, bit by bit, it could be something that actually brings about a better, more peaceful, more harmonious world.

As you’re sitting here this morning, perhaps reflecting on your own enemies or the people in your life that you struggle to love, we’re going to take a few moments to practice seeing and treating our enemies differently.

If you’re using the handouts that were provided by the door, you’ll see that there are some questions to guide your initial thoughts—you might ask yourself, who do I see as my current enemy or enemies? And then you might take a few moments to identify how these enemies make you feel, or what emotions come to mind.

After you’ve reflected on those questions, I’m going to invite you write a quick note to that enemy—but instead of maybe calling them names or yelling at them, or using a few expletives, I encourage you to be a little vulnerable and try to engage with sincerity and honesty. You could write about finding

something in common, or look for ways to humanize them, or think about how you would respond if they offered you an apology that you've been waiting for. This never has to go anywhere, you never have to share this letter with anyone, and it doesn't have to mean that forgiveness or forgetting the past is on the table. It can just be for you, for your own peace. You can also use this time to pray, or ask God for wisdom about how to deal with someone who is currently causing some irritation, or whatever feels appropriate to you.

Like with our previous spiritual practices, let's take a few deep breaths together, find a comfortable position in our chairs, and then we will have some background music playing so that you can relax into a more meditative state.

Does that sound good? Wonderful, let's begin.

cue music

Welcome back, friends. How was this time of reflection and writing for you? Thumbs up, thumbs down, somewhere in the middle?

If you're still unsure of who your enemies might be, or what emotions you are feeling, that could be something that you continue to reflect on and pray about as you begin your week.

If you're still struggling with anger, or frustration, or resentment, or any other emotions related to someone or something in your life that you experience as an enemy, that's okay. Today was maybe just the first attempt in a new direction, and a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

So here's where I'll wrap things up for today:

If we are going to be people of faith, or followers of Jesus, then we must wrestle with our impulses to separate from each other, or demonize each other, or harm each other. If we're going to be ambassadors of hope and reconciliation in our local communities and in our nation, we need to understand our own desire to engage certain people with hostility, or demean people who think and act differently, or react with contempt when faced with

conflict. If we're going to have any positive impact on our neighborhood, we've got to be better neighbors.

Because the peaceful world that God wants for his beloved creation, is a world without enemies. The relationships that God wants for each of us are relationships without grudges or harsh words or bitterness. The redemption that God is offering isn't just for the purpose of individual healing, but for the purpose of collective harmony—both now and forever. Good news that comes with hidden hatred isn't actually good news, but good news based in love will transform even the most unlikely situations and the most unlikely individuals into the Kingdom that God has promised us.

Amen.