

September 3rd: Slow to Anger, part two

Today we finish our journey together through the story of Jonah. I've mentioned every week that as we navigate this ancient text, we've been 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—and I hope that over the course of these twelve weeks, you've discovered that to be true.

This series has been slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. As we've seen, Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I've really enjoyed our slower pace, with time each week to dig a little deeper but also put our meditations into practice. For each passage, we've first dug 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 for each passage, like today, 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.

We have our final spiritual practice this morning, a practice that I hope will help us make sense of this narrative. So, as we prepare to conclude this series, would you pray with me?

Eternal yet mysterious God,

We come into this space grappling with the complexity and uncertainty that lies underneath our daily routines—despite our best intentions, so much seems out of our control and so much is difficult for us to understand. We are frustrated by the situations and experiences that remind us of our human frailty and the temporary nature of our lives, so we seek your presence this morning in hopes that you will comfort our weary hearts and guide us in a direction that brings fulfillment and hope. Amen.

As I mentioned last week, this final chapter of Jonah does not end neatly, all wrapped up nicely with a bow. Like a book whose ending makes you want to throw it across the room, the story of our reluctant prophet concludes in a rather unsatisfying way.

But before we jump to the ending, let's recap a few of the major plot points:

At the end of chapter 3, Jonah is mad that his enemies—the Ninevites—have repented and have been saved from God's wrath. He's angry that God has spared them from the destruction that Jonah clearly thought they deserved. So chapter 4 is really just a long, dramatic tantrum that Jonah throws because he realizes that God is much more gracious and much more forgiving than he would prefer. Jonah knows that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but he didn't expect that God would behave the same way toward everyone! Jonah thought that God's love was only for him and his Israelite family—it was supposed to be an exclusive club!

Remember—this is the same Jonah who ran off to Tarshish, the same guy who put all of his fellow sailors at risk in a storm, the same prophet who was rescued by a giant fish when he was thrown overboard. Jonah wanted mercy for himself and his past foolish decisions, but he didn't think he'd have to share that mercy with others!

I imagine that God laughs at Jonah's indignation—and we do hear in this text that God mocks Jonah with this question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" And yet, our friend Jonah, ever the drama queen, professes not once, not twice, but three separate times that he thinks it would be better for him to die than to have to endure God's seeming unfairness.

Last week, I compared this story to the Old Testament story of Job—a man who was tested by God, lost all of his family and possessions, and had many questions about why this was allowed to happen to him. He brings those questions to God, and God responds in a similar way to Job that we see in Jonah's story. But there's a small difference between these two men: while Job

ultimately comes to understand that God sometimes acts in unknowable and mysterious ways, Jonah is still demanding his own way and demanding that God operate according to his human standards.

At the conclusion of chapter 4, God tries one more time to communicate with Jonah—but we're left on a biblical cliffhanger, because we never find out if Jonah learns his lesson or not. We're just sort of left to deal with picking up the pieces, or sorting through our own thoughts, or grappling with our own questions.

Here are the questions I posed last week about this confusing ending:

How are we supposed to understand and find meaning in a biblical story that feels so unfinished?

How are we, as modern day people of God, supposed to learn anything from a text that doesn't seem interested in giving us any tangible answers?

How can we navigate our own spiritual journeys in the face of such uncertainty?

What are we supposed to do with our questions, and our anger at a universe that doesn't seem to operate in a way that we think it should?

I think both the story of Jonah and the story of Job illustrate that God isn't necessarily afraid of our human questions. So I think it's good for us to know that it's not the natural doubts or the valid inquiries that God has an issue with—there are even some parts of scripture where God seems to reward the people who are curious about the divine. When we come to God with our questions, God often shows up and engages with us—but that engagement doesn't always mean that God promises answers that we'll like or even promises answers at all. Sometimes the way God engages with our questions is like the Socratic method—God keeps using the questions to prompt our own

discovery, or God keeps using our line of investigation to help us draw our own conclusions.

Therefore, I don't want to discourage anyone from asking questions or wrestling with their faith—and I don't think God wants to stop us from those things either. But I think God does value humility as part of this process, as well as the ability to live into the uncertainty when our curiosity doesn't result in tangible, appealing answers.

Today as we close out our Jonah Journey, we're going to engage in a final spiritual practice—a practice which I think will help us grapple with our own internal tensions or the frustration we sometimes feel. I've named this practice “the Spiritual Suitcase,” but you can imagine any type of luggage that you prefer—a backpack, a purse, a duffle bag, whatever comes to mind.

I created this spiritual practice because of a particular *How I Met Your Mother* episode from about a decade ago. In this episode, our main protagonist, Ted Mosby is furious when a blockbuster movie is written about him and his ex-girlfriend Stella, and the film portrays him as the villain rather than the hero. While watching this movie, Ted discovers that he has held onto a lot of emotional baggage, which has resulted in broken relationships and unhappiness. The episode has a creative way of portraying this emotional baggage—characters are shown with suitcases, or briefcases, or guitar cases, all labeled with their particular predicaments. Ted's giant trunk reads “left at the altar,” while others baggage says things like “Cubs fan,” “loves cats more than people,” and “still thinks his ska band is going to take off.”

I remember really loving this episode, because it hinted at something pretty true: whether or not we can see it, each of us are carrying around some difficult experiences, and those experiences, or memories, or situations can make it a struggle to engage with others. At the end of the episode, Ted says, “You see, everyone's got some baggage. It's part of life. But like anything else, it's easier when someone gives you a hand with it.”

I think the same idea and principle applies to spirituality. Despite our best intentions, I think we've all got a little Jonah in us, and that means we carry around some beliefs, or experiences, or emotions that sometimes make it difficult to engage with God. If the term "spiritual baggage" resonates with you, that's great, but if not, you might be able to think about some questions or doubts or frustrations that have kept you from the spiritual relationships or growth that you desire. You might be able to name some fears or uncertainties or anger that you hold onto that is creating heaviness for you,

So in this exercise of the "Spiritual Suitcase", we'll be taking some time to unpack some of those thoughts or feelings that we've had around this biblical text, so that you don't have to hold it all alone. As we unpack our own suitcases, there's an opportunity to be vulnerable with God in a way that you might not have been before.

If you're using the handouts that were provided at the door, you'll see that we have a few questions to guide your thoughts—you can use them to start your meditation, or perhaps they will spark a different line of inquiry for you. If you didn't grab a handout, or would prefer to reflect internally, here are the questions for you to ponder:

First, what questions am I carrying around? And second, what do I feel weighed down by in my spiritual journey? After you've had a chance to consider those—I invite you to think about your spiritual unpacking list. Feel free to make a list of things that you'd like to unpack, or the ideas that are feeling heavy to you right now, or the doubts you've shoved away in the back of your mental closet. On your journey, you might consider what you still need to unload so that you can embark upon a new adventure.

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 mental unpacking for you? Thumbs up, thumbs down, somewhere in the middle?

It's completely okay if you're still feeling weighed down, or you're still carrying around some heavy questions—there's a lot in our world to be uncertain about, and a lot of aspects of faith and spirituality to wrestle with, so as much as I love these moments of meditation, we can't expect that we'll solve all our problems or grapple with all of our doubts or unload all of our anger in just a few short minutes.

However, just because this is the conclusion of our Jonah story, doesn't mean that this has to be the end of the road for you if you feel like this topic or these spiritual practices have resonated with you. If you're still unpacking what you've learned, or still processing what this story has meant for you, you can take any of these meditations that we've used together and take whatever step feels right for you.

My friends, the journey of faith means that we have the opportunity to be unpacking and repacking for the rest of our lives. While that might be heavy or difficult at times, it is a gift to be on a path that continually offers us something new to learn, a new way to engage, or a new source of inspiration. It is a gift to seek a God who doesn't force us to have all the answers, but always offers us a fresh perspective, a fresh mystery, a fresh reason for curiosity. I hope we can hold onto that and see the hope in it.

It is a blessing to share the road with you, and I hope that this time in the story of Jonah has brought you the insight or discernment that you have been looking for. Thank you for walking this path with me.

Amen.