

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Jonah’s Hissy Fit / No Mercy for You”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgepeth

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
September 24, 2017

Jonah 3:1-4:11; Psalms 145: 1-8; . Matthew 20: 1-15

When I was a child growing up in Charlotte, my father would often
play games with my brothers and myself around the dinner table.
And one of his favorite games was called College Bowl,
which meant he would call out famous quotes to us,
and we were supposed to remember, quickly, who had said them.
These usually were the same quotes, perhaps in a different order, each time
we played the game; so even though the playing field was not level,
as there was a five-year age span
between myself and my youngest brother, David,
we had memorized the schtick after a pretty short time.
I cannot tell a lie. – George Washington, supposedly;

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent

a new nation, conceived in liberty... – Abraham Lincoln's, Gettysburg Address;

One if by land; two if by sea. – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, about Paul Revere's ride;

Yesterday, December 7, 1941 - a date which will live in infamy – FDR,

after the attack on Pearl Harbor;

I'm itchin' like a man in a fuzzy tree. – Elvis

Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.

- JFK's inaugural address.

Never, never, never give up. – Winston Churchill;

But one of my favorite quotes which my father tossed out repeatedly was this:

The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown. ...It is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute of God himself...

– William Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice."

Now I know that we have been dealing with overwhelming quantities of wind

and rain in the southeast and the Caribbean lately;

with massive hurricanes like Harvey, Irma, Jose, and now Maria having dumped

inordinate amounts of not-so-gentle rain upon innocent people,

places, and animals.

But the metaphor still holds: God's rain-like mercy, whether gentle or not so gentle,

falls randomly on rich and poor, young and old, native and immigrant,

gay, straight and trans, wise and foolish.

This attribute of God, this quality of mercy, which is not strained, not selective, not discriminate, not favoring, but falling randomly, like rain, is exactly what the prophet, Jonah, can neither imagine nor tolerate.

That God might rain down mercy upon Ninevites,
upon pagan Ninevites, upon undeserving Ninevites,
even upon evil Ninevites, and especially upon the Assyrian Ninevites,
who will soon lay siege to the Northern Kingdom of Israel;

this is exactly the irritant that sticks in Jonah's craw,

just as he himself once stuck as an irritant in the craw of that great fish.

That the sovereign God would be randomly merciful, even and especially to those who don't seem deserving of such grace; that God *never, never, never gives up*, upon any of the inhabitants of God's creation, no matter how badly we might behave, is just inconceivable for Jonah.

Hence, the hissy fit!

As a prophet, Jonah, is called to be an instrument of God's late-breaking, in-breaking grace, which he cannot seem to fathom.

He is called, in the prophetic tradition, to interpret a given moment in history, and guided by the Spirit of God, to indicate how current human practices are trending.

And *the future forecast* for the city of Nineveh, which God desires Jonah to reveal, is that the welfare of *their city*, the shalom of *their people*, *their well-being*, *their peace* and *their prosperity* are now at the top of God's to-do list, even though they are sworn enemies of God's chosen people, Israel.

That doesn't matter; being at odds with God's chosen people is not
an insurmountable barrier to God's peace plan.

Jonah is being called by God to serve as a bridge-builder and a peace-maker
to Nineveh, the capital of the evil Assyrian empire,

because, as Duke Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis puts it,
"*actively seeking shalom for our enemies is what God expects of us.*"

That is what a 'future hope' looks like in God's own white-hot imagination:

people praying without ceasing *for their enemies*,

appealing to God for *the godless*,

putting all their hope in God's ability to craft shalom..

out of misery, suffering, and even profound spiritual poverty."

(Davis, Ellen. *Biblical Prophecy*, p. 19)

In this our season of peace, which we are celebrating here at FPC

throughout the month of September,

this is crucially important for us to hear and ponder:

that actively seeking shalom *for our enemies* is what God expects of us!

The book of Jonah is the only book of the twelve minor prophets

that is in the genre of a narrative.

It is artistic and imaginative, more like a fable or a parable, in that it casts

two things alongside one another.

Thing One is Jonah's personal experience of God's sovereign rain of mercy which

blesses his own journey, saves him from a great storm, a hurricane,

perhaps, by providing a great fish which scoops him up

and harbors him in its belly, until it is safe to vomit him up on the shore.

We all love that part of the story!

Then, that same divine rain of mercy also provides a much-needed castor bean plant
which grows up quickly to shelter and shade Jonah

from the sweltering heat of the sun,

which unfortunately is no match for the heat of Jonah's anger.

Then, Jonah's personal salvific episodes are strangely juxtaposed to *Thing Two*:

God's sovereign rain of mercy upon the hated imperial city, Nineveh,

with an offer for them to repent and be saved

from equally withering destruction.

And while Jonah basks in the rain of God's mercy when it pours down on him;

he seethes when it becomes his enemy who likewise is shown God's mercy.

What?

As a matter of fact, he can't stand it. He pitches a royal hissy fit,

rails against God in his anger, and walks out on God, again,

for a second time, to take a seat and wait for God

to come to God's senses and relent on the offer of mercy towards the Ninevites.

Jonah is a prophet-gone-wrong, in that he is unable to imagine or enact

the future hope and peace that God envisions for *all of creation*.

Can we learn from his knee-jerk example?

This Hebrew narrative is artistic and imaginative, and I think it calls for

imaginative responses from us.

Can we imagine modern situations that would evoke Jonah-esque reactions from us?

What if the citizens of Pyongyang were told by a third party, maybe Dennis Rodman,

that they needed to repent.

And what if they took it to heart, declared a fast and put on sackcloth.

And what if their ruler, Kim Jon Un, unexpectedly embraced this repentance,

put on sackcloth, himself, sat down in the dust and issued an edict

to all the people of North Korea, urging them to change their ways,

and relent of their aggressions.

Would we believe them? Would we take their repentance to heart?

Could we drop our defenses and take our finger off the nuclear trigger?

Would we offer them an olive branch, abolish economic sanctions,

and prepare a negotiating table for us?

If the quality of God's mercy towards North Korea is not strained,

would ours be of equal quality and graciousness?

Could we imagine God showing such embrative mercy towards the foreigner,

especially the combative foreigner?

Lord knows, the people of North Korea are starving and need some mercy.

We flounder in our prophetic imagination, like Jonah, I think,

if we cannot bring the aggressive foreigner to the negotiating table,

and eat and talk *as if we were the friends we would wish to be.*

Let's imagine another situation, closer to home, because

the closer we get to home, the more our prophetic imagination is stretched!

What if you are a citizen of Miami as Hurricane Irma is approaching,

and you heed the advice of Governor Scott and take your family

and a few belongings to one of the local shelters as soon as it opens,

and prepare to shelter in place until the storm passes.

And what if, the shelter is full on the day before the storm is to make landfall,
no more room at the inn, no more food to feed the 5,000,
when a man, Jose, and his family knocks on the door
looking for a place to ride out the storm.

They are illegal immigrants, they admit, who were afraid to come into a shelter
earlier, for fear of being discovered and deported.

But now Jose says he fears for their lives,
and wants to provide protection for his family.

Do you let the late-comers into the already-full shelter?

It's the same dilemma that Jesus details in his parable of the Workers in the Vineyard:
where those hired at the 11th hour are paid the same as those
hired at the beginning of the harvest.

Does the quality of God's mercy apply to illegals, and to late-comers, and to late-hires,
just as it applies to those who are law-abiding, and who do everything
"decently and in order"?

And do some have the right to rail at God, like Jonah, for the quality of mercy
shown to others?

Frederick Buechner in his definition of compassion says this:

"Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like
to live inside someone else's skin."

I imagine people who have come into this country illegally know better
than any of us how it feels to be threatened and victimized,
whether by an abusive entity, or by a massive storm.

Buechner adds, compassion "is (also) the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me, until there is peace and joy finally for you, too."

(Buechner, Frederick. *Beyond Words*. p. 65)

We falter in our prophetic imagination, like Jonah, I think,
if we cannot extend the mercy and grace, peace and joy
we (Thing One) have experienced ourselves to include others,
whether we think they (Things Two) deserve it or not.

And even closer to home, where stretching our prophetic imaginations
becomes downright painful,
what if the protesters who pulled down the Confederate statue
just across the street from us at the Old Courthouse
had their felony charges and fines reduced,
while others who previously had committed less serious acts of vandalism
still were prosecuted, charged and fined?

I can imagine those others burning with resentment, and saying:
"God, we knew that you were gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love; a God who relents
from sending calamity. But why were we not extended the same mercy?
It's not fair. No mercy for us; no mercy for them."

Here again, I think we flail in our prophetic imagination, like Jonah,
if we cannot imagine what might happen if some were
unabashedly exonerated now, in order to promote
a greater good and God's future shalom.

These are hard scenarios even to imagine, much less for us to enact and practice.

Jonah certainly didn't possess the prophetic imagination to do it... or did he?

His is an open ended story,

in that we never hear his response to God's gentle chiding.

Sitting there under the remains of that withered vine, Jonah confesses that he is

angry enough to die.

He is the most human of our Hebrew prophets, perhaps:

reluctant, stubborn, strong-willed, whiny, wish-washy, fearful,

prone to hissy fits and walk outs, in need of anger management counsel.

But God, the merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love One

says to him, "Jonah, Jonah, you have been concerned about this vine,

although you did not tend it or make it grow.

It sprang up overnight, and died overnight.

But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people

who cannot tell their right hand from their left,

and many cattle as well (who cannot tell their right hooves from their left).

Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4: 9b-11)

And we don't know the rest of the story.

We don't know how Jonah responds to God's gentle remonstrations;

how far his prophetic imagination is able to stretch,

to include the foreigner, the enemy, the animal, even the aggressor.

But we do know this: *God never, never, never gives up on Jonah,*

just as God never, never, never gives up on Nineveh, or on any of

God's obtuse creatures who cannot tell our right from our left.

God's desire is to have them and us, us and them, as God's friends and partners
in God's reign of mercy, even when our understanding
and our imaginations are just beastly.

And in this we can take great hope, or perhaps lamentation, depending upon your
inclination: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3: 22-23) Amen.

© Marilyn Hedgepeth, 09/24/2017

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2017. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.