

# *“Oh Jonah”*

*Epiphany 3  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10*

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine  
Associate Minister

*January 21, 2018*

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

**Prayer for Illumination:** *Gracious God, through the power of your Holy Spirit, silence in us any voice but your own. Set aside this time from the busyness of our lives, so that in hearing your written and spoken word we may hear what you have for us this day. Through Christ we pray, Amen.*

Rarely do you find a book of the Bible that could easily start, “It Was a Dark and Stormy Night or “Once Upon a Time.” The Book of Jonah may be it. I attribute the ideas in this sermon to a colleague who shared this with me.<sup>1</sup>

In all its four chapters, all its 48 short verses, this tale of Jonah offers twists and ironies and truths about the human condition. It’s too bad that the fish gets all the attention. The fish makes its appearance in Chapter 2. The notion of how any human can spend three days in the belly of a sea creature and live to tell about it seems a bit too much to swallow. Don’t let the fish trip you up when you read the story for yourself. Tucked away between the minor prophets, Obadiah and Micah, Jonah reads more like a work of religious fiction.

Here’s what you’ve missed if you’re coming back to the text after a long time away. God tells an otherwise unknown Jewish man named Jonah to get himself to the wicked non-Jewish, enemy city of

---

<sup>1</sup> I heard a sermon entitled, *Nursing Anger*, from The Rev. Michael L. Lindvall, at The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City. I borrow heavily with permission.

Nineveh. There Jonah is to preach repentance to the infamously awful Ninevites. In response to this divine command, Jonah promptly gets on a boat going in the exact opposite direction. God causes a great storm to overtake the boat. The superstitious sailors decide that passenger Jonah is bad luck and are about to toss him overboard when he volunteers to jump. Jonah would have drowned, but God finds a great fish to swallow him up. Jonah spends three days in its belly, a good place to think things over, and where Jonah prays to God to save him. And God does this. The fish spews Jonah up on the beach within walking distance from Nineveh, exactly where he was supposed to go in the first place.

Our passage this morning that Scott/Greg read is the “second chance,” the “do-over,” for Jonah.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” This time Jonah does go. Astonishingly, the Ninevites actually repent. They commit themselves to change their ways. And God, who had earlier thought to zap them, changes God’s mind and spares the city.

Jonah may be the least committed most effective preacher there is. He is in the first day’s walk into a three-day journey through the city he doesn’t want to be in, preaching repentance to a people he despises...and without a blink—they repent, just like that.

Jonah cannot believe what he sees with his very eyes. The people whom God was so angry with repent because of the words Jonah shouts through the streets. God has given to the Ninevites what God gave to Jonah, a do-over, a second chance. Jonah is more than just bewildered by this. He is down right furious. He is angry that the Ninevites repented, and he's angry that God decided not to do them in. Jonah essentially says, "I knew this would happen! Why did you make me come here in the first place? I had my ticket to Tarshish. God, I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but Nineveh was never on my bucket list and now I am here."

Oh, Jonah! You should have just gone to Nineveh in the first place. Jonah sounds like a toddler, pouting and stomping his foot to prove his point. Perhaps unable to distinguish between disappointment and frustration. Now, Jonah is angry at God for not being sufficiently angry at Nineveh; Jonah is angry at God for being gracious, merciful and forgiving. Who does that? Sound like anybody you know?

By the end of the story, Jonah is left nursing his anger, sulking in the hot sun on the outskirts of the city. In his own words, he is "angry enough to die." He never really gets over that God is not as angry as he is about it all.

What strikes me in this story is not how quickly the people of Nineveh repent. Or even the theologically rich conversation about how God changed God's mind and didn't smite the people, but rather the anger that Jonah holds on to.

Ironically, and sadly true to life that the story should end with Jonah sitting in the sun nursing his anger. It's a powerful juxtaposition between the anger Jonah holds and God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. There are too many of us who end up like Jonah, sitting in the sun and nursing our anger. Sound like anyone you know?

A few years ago, when planning a Bible Study with a colleague, we asked for a list of topics they might like to discuss. It was an intriguing list of real-life issues. "Finding balance, priorities, over-busyness, relationships, forgiveness," and then someone who hadn't contributed yet offered, "anger." I didn't gather she was a particularly angry person, or that the group was an angry group, but anger was on the list. If we're honest, it's on everyone's list. It was a reminder that anger is a reality that we have to deal with.

Anger does have its place in life. There are certainly things in this world worthy of our anger---injustice, cruelty, greed, stupid wars, government shutdowns. Let's put this in the category of righteous indignation. Rising up. Resisting unjust actions are worthy of our anger.

There are other things that make us angry. You and I are often appropriately angry about more personal matters---betrayal, some unfairness that's done us wrong, a lie told about us, a cruelty directed at us. The response is anger. Maybe we hold it for a while. Or we hold it for a long while.

In the Bible, God is occasionally said to be “angry.” It makes the point that God cares passionately about right and wrong.

The other aspect of anger is that it's a place you may visit once and again, but going there too often is dangerous, and living there is deadly. In my email this week was this timely quote from Frederick Buechner on anger.

He writes, “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”<sup>2</sup>

Living in the land of anger corrodes the soul; it hardens the heart; it lessens life. Anger can become a way of being. It's attention getting,

---

<sup>2</sup> In *Wishful Thinking*. Frederick Buechner weekly email quotes. January 16, 2018

and it energizes in a negative way. It gives our life a sort of bizarre purpose.

In fact, if you let go of anger, it's yourself you give the gift to, more than the person you are mad at. Whatever your circumstance, whatever you endured is real and wrong, and you have every right to be angry. Letting go of anger doesn't mean you have to trivialize the offense or minimize how much it hurt. But in electing to live in ongoing anger, in choosing to stay there, it's yourself you finally wound.

The story ends with Jonah stewing in his resentment of God's grace. The unfairness of it. Jonah does not think there is any justice for him or his people who have suffered, when God just goes and forgives the Ninevites. Jonah wants God to be like Jonah--angry. But God is not like that. What is lost on Jonah is that God doesn't share Jonah's opinions about the Ninevites. God doesn't play favorites. It's a tough ending.

The story ends. But Jonah's life continues.

When we think nothing can pierce our anger-- God enters. God empowers us to find a way past anger. No matter who has committed the offense, God is always willing to extend grace and mercy. God equips us to move beyond our anger in an even more powerful way. For people of faith, God is not a theoretical idea; God is not an abstract principle. God is real, here and now, present

in our life. I think when we know of this God who is a still speaking God, still here and now and present in our lives, we are speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit.

I know from my own experience that there have been many things in life I could not have gotten through on my own. Time and again, I know that God has strengthened me to do what I could not do by myself, to love when love was not what I was feeling, to press on when I was exhausted, to move beyond anger when anger was all I had.

So maybe in this darkness or fairy tale story we read about Jonah, (and ourselves), there lies an invitation, a holy invitation. When we feel like we just can't let go of the anger, ask, pray to the One whose very name is grace and mercy and love, and trust that the One who is steadfast love incarnate will strengthen us to do the impossible, to let go of the anger. It's in the letting go and in the laying down of whatever we are carrying, that our hands are then open to receive grace and mercy and love. In those open hands, may we glimpse the new life that awaits us all.

Amen.

Copyright 2018, First Congregational Church, UCC