

**All About Jonah  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
24 January 2021  
sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae**

The last couple of weeks we have talked about God being completely present in our world, in creation and what it means to be totally known by God. Today we take it one step further again and examine what it means to be fully a part of God's good creation. In relationship with humanity and creation around us, as we grow in discipleship and following God's calling. And Jonah will help us do that.

Now most of you, when I mention Jonah, think about the belly of the big fish and the lengths that some people, will go to in order to avoid God's call in our lives. But that is only part of the story. It is the rest of the story of Jonah that we are going to talk about today. It is the rest of the story that really speaks to the problems we encounter when we hang on to selfishness and get stuck in our own ways of thinking, when we don't make room for others. If ever there was a character fitting the divisions and tensions of 2021, it is Jonah. If ever there was a scripture about self awareness of the human condition, this is it. And we rarely ever preach on it. Because it leaves you

wondering why God didn't just leave Jonah in the belly of the fish. Because it smacks so much of what we are witnessing now, when one person's ego and wants can put the safety of many at risk. It is a tough story to unpack because Jonah is a prophet, and we expect so much more from people in positions of authority, people God calls. It is a tough story because in his raw unsettled humanity we see ourselves, and we see our society and we realize that the issues we face today are ones that God has been working us through for thousands upon thousands of years.

You see Nineveh, as a city, had their problems they had their sin and wickedness and needed to change their ways. But what I want to talk about today are the issues weighing Jonah down and the immense love of our forgiving and patient God. When we meet Jonah in our scripture reading today he has been spit up on the shore (from the belly of the big fish) and hears God call him (again) to go to Ninevah. This time still smelling of a fish's dinner, he decides he'd best agree, and so he goes. And he does what any good prophet would do, he gets to the great city and begins to shout out his message to them. It was more of a message than instructions actually. He never asks them to repent, he never gives them a to-do

list of how to regain God's favour he just wanders from one end of the city to the other telling them that they are doomed. He presents an eviction notice if you will, "40 days and this city shall be overthrown!" Not, "Repent now, or your city will be overthrown" not "Accept the Lord or your city will be overthrown", just, "You have 40 days and then you're going down."

Well the people of Ninevah heard the message loud and clear and they seemed to understand why this might happen, they had a pretty good handle on their wickedness and self aware sinners that they were, they began a heart felt process of repentance. Even the king. They wore sackcloth and fasted (even the animals) and they really put in an effort. They saw the error of their ways and wanted to realign themselves with God. They took their spiritual journey seriously. They put in some work.

And God took notice. People really can change, if they want to. And so God, who loves God's creation, who offers new life, spared them. We are told, "God changed his mind." Because of something humanity did. How cool is that? God changed his mind. God's mind can be swayed, impacted by our love, our repentance, our work, our effort. God can be swayed.

Jonah on the other hand, can not. And really the most interesting part of this whole little book of scripture is the part the lectionary doesn't have us read. But I wanted to keep reading.

The scripture continues with a section entitled "Jonah's Anger at the Lord's Compassion". Jonah upon hearing that God changed God's mind and Ninevah would be spared, becomes angry. Like a foreign leader unwilling to accept election results not in his favour, Jonah doesn't like the truth in front of him, he doesn't want to accept what the Lord tells him. Jonah is angry about the Lord's compassion. Although Jonah admits that the Lord is gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, he just can't seem to bring together God's ways with his own ways, his own understanding of justice and punishment. And that chasm of understanding, his own distance from God's ways seems so large, he would rather die than live with it. And he asks God to kill him.

God, like an ever patient parent, says, "Really, is it right for you to be this angry?" And then God tells Jonah the way it is and waits to see how Jonah responds. "Jonah, I am God of all these people," God tells him. "You are no more special than them. I can care about them as I can care about you." Jonah walks away and sits down to

wait and watch under the burning sun, in the merciless heat, for what will, or will not, happen to Ninevah. Jonah still think there is something amiss, still thinks the results can be overturned, Jonah still thinks he can win.

And God waits too. For Jonah to accept the truth in front of him, to accept God's love for God's people. God grows a tree for Jonah to sit under so he doesn't get too hot as he waits for the smiting that won't happen. And Jonah gets quite comfortable there in his bitterness and sulking and self importance. God realizes that by making things too comfortable God is enabling Jonah's selfish and unhealthy ways and so God sends a worm to kill the tree. By morning it has shriveled, exposing Jonah again to the blazing heat. And again, Jonah wants to die, so filled with anger, we are told, he wants to die.

Ok then. "Explain that to me," God says. "Explain to me how you can be so upset over a tree that you did not plant, that you did not care for or nourish, but you expect that I should not be concerned about Ninevah, about a great city with more than 120,000 people living in it, and, God says, also so many animals." I love that God

includes that part, about the animals. “Why should I then not be concerned about my creation. All of my creation, not just you.”

And that is where it ends. Abruptly. We get no further response from Jonah, God has the last word and this book of scripture is done. And that is interesting on a lot of levels but I think, today, it means the question is being asked of us. Jonah doesn't answer because the scripture calls us to answer.

The scripture calls us to consider how we control our selfishness and our anger so that it does not eat away at us and corrupt our life. It also calls us to see past ourselves to recognize our place among all of God's creation. To remember that God's love is for all, humanity and creation, and as followers of God, we should do what we can to extend love and care for all of creation too.

The story of Jonah is also a lovely prelude to the story of Jesus. God loves the people of Nineveh so much that he welcomes their repentance and promises salvation and new life. God loves the world so much that God sent Jesus to redeem us and bring new life, to bring us back to God. So that no matter how many times we fail to live up to our fullness, no matter how many times we sin and repent,

no matter how much division we may endure in our world, through the love of Christ we know new life.

This is an important reminder at a time when our world is filled with divisions. It is an important reminder during this week for Christian Unity. God's love is for all, Christ's redeeming love and grace is offered to all. We don't have to worry about not getting our share, we are assured that there is enough grace, enough forgiveness for everyone.

Last week we talked about how God loves us and wants to be in relationship with the real us, with all of our weakness and sins and mud covered shoes. This week we learn that this is still true, but God has some requirements of us in this relationship. God's love for us doesn't mean we get to do what we want or that we get to act without thought for others. This week we are reminded, through the arrogance of Jonah, that God expects us to grow, expects us to respect others, and God will give us opportunities to do that, even if those opportunities come in ways that are uncomfortable. This week, at a time filled with divisions and threats, at a time when we are physically isolated from one another and locked down and called to protect the most vulnerable, God reminds us that there is a lot of work

left to do. But when we do it, like the Ninevites we will be saved, like Jonah we will have the opportunity to be a part of the new beginning, ... we will be whole. And when we don't. Well, we can keep running but God will just keep sending those big hungry fish and those hungry little worms to eat away at our comfort zone until we face what we need to face.

What do you need to face? How do you need to grow?

How will you make it less about you this week, and more about creation? How will you make it less about you and your wants and more about the needs of another? How will we rise from the discomfort of the divisions of our world, from the fear of the pandemic, and work to live more responsive as a society, so that when God says, "How can you not expect me to care about all of these people and all of these animals?" we can finish this book of scripture with an answer that tells God we care too.

And that question will never need to be asked again.