

January 21st, 2018

Scripture:

Psalm 62

Jonah 4:1-11

“A gracious and compassionate God.”

We all likely know the story of Jonah ---- or at least parts of the story.

Jonah in the belly of a whale for 3 days is the part many of us are likely familiar with --- it's a Sunday school staple ---- or at least used to be ---- who here heard about Jonah and the whale as a child?

Well the Jonah story as a whole is an interesting story on obedience ---- and grace and responding to change --- and more ---- but don't take my word for it --- take a few minutes today or tonight or tomorrow ---- and give a read --- ----- it's only 2 pages long --- the entire book takes 15 minutes or so to read - -- it's short but powerful.

The story of Jonah is essentially this ---- God calls Jonah and asks him to go to Nineveh to preach --- calling the Ninevites to change their ways --- otherwise God will overthrow and ruin their city.

And Jonah's initial reaction to this calling is to run the other way --- literally run away from God.

Instead of heading for Nineveh as God asks --- Jonah goes and boards a ship headed for Tarshish.

And while on board a terrible storm erupts ----- and Jonah aware that he just may be the cause of the storm --- tells those on board to throw him overboard to ease the storm and calm the waters.

Not wanting to have to throw a man overboard to certain death the men on board try their hardest to row to shore --- but to no avail --- the storm is just too strong.

And so they eventually agree and toss Jonah over board into the stormy waters to certain death just as he suggested they do.

But die Jonah didn't ---- a big fish --- or a whale --- swallowed him up and protected him for 3 days.

For days Jonah prays inside the fish --- see chapter 2 of Jonah for his prayers.

And 3 days after being swallowed Jonah is spit back up --- vomited as the NIV says --- onto dry land.

And so at this point Jonah figures he had better do as God asks ----- and he heads for Nineveh as God has first called him to do.

And when he gets there he preaches God's word ----- and one of the things God asks him to say is --- "40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown".

"40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" --- chapter 3 verse 4.

And remarkably ----- as Jonah preaches ---- people bow down to God and change their ways --- they go from unfaithfulness to faithfulness --- they go from living unrighteously to living righteously --- they suddenly submit to God's will.

Even the King ---- when he hears Jonah message ---- sends out a decree that everyone should call out to God asking for mercy --- and a decree that everyone should change their ways --- give up their evil ways and give up violence.

And so God hears their cries --- and God sees that they have changed their ways --- and so He relents and does not harm them as he first told Jonah he would.

As verse 10 from chapter 3 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."

What a Good News story right?

For sure it's a Good News story ----- someone --- Jonah ---- responds to God's call ----- preaches what God wants him to --- the people he preaches

to change their ways --- and God is pleased and changes His mind and doesn't harm them.

A Good News story!

But ----- well ---- it's not so Good News to Jonah --- Jonah is unhappy.

Jonah doesn't like the fact that God changed His mind and showed grace and mercy.

Jonah is so unhappy in fact that he says that he would rather die than carry on seeing Nineveh saved and prosper under God.

Chapter 4 begins --- remember God has just saved the city from certain destruction at His hands.

And chapter 4 begins this way.

“But to Jonah this seemed very wrong.”

“But to Jonah this seemed very wrong.”

Jonah thought it was wrong that the people of Nineveh should be saved.

“But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

He prayed to the Lord, “Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home?

That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Jonah is angry ----- Jonah knows that God is gracious and compassionate --
---- “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger
and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

Jonah is angry that God showed compassion to the Ninevites --- so angry
that he even asks God to kill him.

“Now Lord take away my life --- for it is better for me to die than to live.” --
- he says in verse 3.

Man that's some kind of anger ----

“God I know you are gracious and compassionate --- but I don't like the fact that you were gracious and compassionate to them --- those people --- in fact I don't like the fact that you were gracious and compassionate to them so much so that I want you to kill me --- I don't want to be alive to see you being gracious and compassionate towards them --- so kill me --- just take my life --- because I can't stand to see what you're doing here with these people.”

Seeing and hearing his frustration ---- God acts graciously and compassionately towards Jonah ---- God grows a little plant for him to find respite from the piercing heat of the sun --- He gives Jonah some comfort to think these over a bit.

And as verse 6 says --- “...and Jonah was very happy about the plant...”

God shows some grace and compassion to Jonah and he's pretty happy.

But then God sends a worm to devour the plant and Jonah is left at the mercy of a scorching east wind and a blazing sun.

And so it's back to being bitter again for Jonah ----“Kill me --- take my life.”
--- Jonah says once again.

Just as God changed His mind about what He would do with the Ninevites so God changes His mind about what to do with the respite he offered Jonah --- the plant and the shade.

And just as Jonah was unhappy about how God handled the Ninevites ----- so is he is unhappy about how God is now dealing with him.

Jonah wants God's grace and compassion on his terms.

Jonah wants God on his terms.

Jonah wants God to show His grace and His compassion in a way that is pleasing to Jonah.

Jonah knows God is merciful ----“I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” --- he says.

What Jonah doesn't like is that God is gracious and compassionate on His own terms.

He doesn't like it when God shows mercy to the Ninevites by changing His mind and not destroying them.

The truth is ----- there's a lot of Jonah in all of us.

We all love grace and compassion.

We can all agree on that right --- we all love grace and compassion.

Anyone here not like grace ---- anyone here not like compassion?

Conceptually we all like grace and compassion.

In principle ---- we're all in favour of God's grace and compassion.

But --- sometimes we don't really like how and when and why God doles out His mercy and love.

Sometimes maybe we feel like God is reckless ----- or God is careless --- or God is way too free and easy.

“I've led a pretty faithful life God --- I've tried hard to be good.”

“And yet I'm surrounded by others who hardly even give a care.”

“How come they're prospering --- how come you're allowing them to prosper God when they don't seem to be trying as hard as I am?”

“How come me who've been working at it hard for so long ---- doesn't seem to prosper --- but so many others do ----- and right under your nose ---- and not only this --- but under your influence as well.”

“How come God --- how come you’re blessing them with such prosperity and not also me?”

“I know you’re gracious and compassionate but come on God what about be --- how about a little grace --- and how about a little compassion for me now too.”

This is precisely what Jonah is wrestling with --- “Why them God --- why have been so good to them when they were so bad for so long ----- what about me?”

And this comes up time and time again in scripture --- this --- “What about me?”

Why do some people --- who have tried to live faithfully for so long suffer --- and others --- who maybe haven’t been faithful at all or haven’t been faithful for very long at all prosper.

“Why do you bless some God ---- and not others?”

“How can you show grace and compassion for these ones and not also these other ones?”

“It looks like you’re choosing the wrong ones to be gracious and compassionate to God.”

“They’re no better than any of the rest of us.”

“It’s just not fair God --- we --- I don’t like it.”

Jonah even goes so far as to say --- “If this is how it’s going to be God --- just take me now --- just kill me now --- because I don’t want to live in a world that works this way.”

Jonah is good with God being gracious and compassionate ----- he just wants God to be gracious and compassionate in a way that makes sense to him.

Jonah doesn't object to God's grace and compassion outright ----- Jonah doesn't object conceptually --- he just objects to the way God chooses to apply it and exercise it.

There's a lot of Jonah in all of us.

We're good with change conceptually --- but when it comes time to change -- when it comes time for us to change and go with what God wants --- and follow God's lead ---- we don't really like it.

God relented and changed His mind in Jonah --- and Jonah didn't like it.

Jonah chapter 3 verse 10 --- the verse immediately preceding our reading today reads ----- "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."

In other words God changed His mind --- God did something different than what Jonah expected --- God did something different and Jonah didn't like it.

Jonah was good with God changing them ---- the Ninevites.

But Jonah wasn't so good with God changing Jonah.

Who --- what ---- where --- when why --- God calls us to change is up to Him to determine.

We're all for grace and compassion ----- we're all for change conceptually -- but hold on a minute --- God you need to tell me exactly how --- and why and when --- before I'll take the first step.

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because he knew God was going to do something that he --- Jonah didn't like.

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh precisely because he knew that God was going to do something that he --- Jonah didn't want God doing.

There's a little Jonah in all of us.

We aren't called to do what God calls us to do only when we like it.

We aren't called to do what God wants us to do only when it makes us feel good.

We aren't called to do what God wants us to do because if us.

We are called to do what God calls us to do and be for the simple reason that God wills it.

God wants Jonah to do something that Jonah doesn't like --- so he runs the other way --- he heads for Tarshish instead of Nineveh --- and in doing so he endangers a whole bunch of other people.

All the others on the boat headed for Tarshish are endangered because of Jonah's selfishness.

Thankfully he comes to his senses and follows God's ways --- and God protects him through the storm ---- literally swallowing him up and transporting him to dry and safe land away from the storm.

God is gracious and God is compassionate ---- God is patient and God is persistent --- just look at Nineveh and just look at Jonah.

When God calls us to do something we might as well just get on board and go with God --- because in the end --- it's always going to go God's way anyway.

Sure we can push back and fight it --- resist --- go the other way --- throw a little tantrum or two on the way --- take it personally and be hurt ----- or we can give over to God and go along with him right from the get go.

We've all got a little bit of Jonah in us.

God's been revealing to me for sometime now that we as a community need to go deeper into His will and not only scratch the surface --- but go deeper.

We need to be more and more focused on Him and not just our wants needs and desires --- not just our feelings.

I've made a few changes in our worship to reflect this calling of God to go deeper and be more intentionally focused on Him --- instead of just what we want and what makes us feel good.

We gather to do what is pleasing to God --- to focus on God and to worship Him.

So --- some people have asked why don't we have the greeting time in the service anymore.

The answer is simple ----- we can still greet each other before and after the service --- so why do we need it in the middle too ----- and because we like it or it makes me feel warm and fuzzy isn't good enough for God.

That's why the greeting time is no longer before and after and during worship --- and instead it's now before and after --- instead of also during worship.

And then there are the songs of praise --- the reason we are singing one or two less songs each week is simply because --- praise is all about leading us into worship ---- praise and worship are not the same things --- praise is what we offer --- worship is what happens when God responds to our praise.

God is telling me that once our praise has led us far as it can take us we need to transition to worship --- and not more praise.

So God has revealed to me ---2 praise songs in our opening praise set are enough for us right now in this season in the life of this congregation to lead us into worship --- for another congregation it may be different ---- for this congregation at another time it may be different but for right now this is what we need.

“Oh but I love to sing --- I feel good when we shake hands...” --- those who miss it might be saying.

Well ----- we're still singing and we're still shaking hands --- just at different times and to different degrees.

Nothing is being removed ----- it's just being brought into a different focus – modified ----- changed ----- and yes change is hard --- very hard ---- but these changes are being done out of love and obedience ---- not just because.

We have our prayers of the people a little earlier on in the service to allow us to be a little more free from carrying a prayer burden until way later in the service.

We're not removing prayer concerns being shared in public worship ----- we're just changing their place in the order.

I realize not everyone likes the changes --- change is hard --- very hard for some --- many even ----but these are God driven changes --- they're not just based on feelings or personal preference.

Some of us loathe the change ----- some of us love the change --- I've heard varying responses.

Some of us maybe haven't even noticed ----- and that's O.K. too.

In a way it matters little ----- because the real question is --- what does God like --- what is God saying.

Because God is the audience in worship --- and God is the topic of worship -- and God is the focus of worship.

The change is because God has said things need to change a little bit --- and He's said it over and over again to me.

And if you're struggling with it ---- that's O.K. too ----- Jonah did --- many people did in scripture.

Change is hard --- very hard for very many.

If you're struggling with it take it to God in prayer --- pray about it ----- He is leading the way ---- talk to Him about it first.

When God speaks we can run the other way.

When God speaks we can ignore it because maybe we don't like it ---- or maybe it doesn't make us feel very good.

When God speaks it isn't primarily about what we like or what makes us feel good.

When God speaks --- the Biblical witness reminds us --- Jonah today ---- when God speaks ----- we are called to follow and do as God instructs because God instructs it --- not necessarily because we like it or like the way it makes us feel.

Jonah didn't like the way it made him feel when he did as God called him to do.

And Jonah didn't like the way it felt when God looked favourable upon the Ninevites.

We do as God calls us to do not because of how we feel about it but because of how God feels about it.

Jeremiah did as God called him to do not because he wanted to --- not because he always liked what God asked of him ----- not because it felt good all the time.

Jeremiah --- Moses --- Amos ---- Isaiah ----- and so on ---- Jonah --- did as God asked of him for no other reason that because God asked him to.

When God asks us to do something ----- go to Nineveh and preach to them -- ---- change our worship such that it draws us a little deeper into the heart of God ---- we have to obey.

And obedience isn't about what feels good --- it's about what is right and true and pleasing in God's eyes ---- and we do it because God calls us to and that is good enough reason.

God is gracious and God is compassionate --- and God changes things in His grace and compassion precisely because He has our best interest in mind ----
 - the challenge is we can't always understand it and we don't always like it -
 -- at least not at first ----- as human beings we prefer the familiar almost always.

“I don't like this one bit God Jonah said --- I know you're gracious and compassionate --- I know you can change your mind --- but I'm not at all enjoying this or feeling good about this --- I don't agree with you God.” --- is what Jonah says in the face of change.

And one way God responds is to say --- “Well it's not just about you Jonah.”

Listen to the last few verse from our passage today ---- verse 10 and 11 from Jonah 4 -----

“But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left ----- and also many animals?”

Jonah has been concerned with the plant God says ---- the plant gave Jonah some comfort and made Jonah feel better.

In other words Jonah's real concern is comfort and feelings --- his comfort and his feelings.

God isn't just ---- God isn't primarily concerned with how Jonah feels --- what Jonah likes and dislikes.

And so God says to Jonah ---- listen again to the last few verses -----

“But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow.
 It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left --- and also many animals?”

“And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people...”

God’s grace and God’s compassion --- God’s will is about more than just how Jonah ----- how one person feels.

God isn’t about to halt His will --- His plan for Nineveh ---- just because it made Jonah unhappy and Jonah didn’t like the way he felt about it.

Sometimes when God speaks and acts it makes some of us have to change -- -- and sometimes it makes some of us not feel so good for a while.

When God changes things it is always for the betterment of the whole.

What was good for us --- salvation --- wasn’t all that good for Christ --- betrayal --- brutal suffering --- humiliation --- and so on.

We have to trust Him --- and we have to submit to Him and we have to be obedient to Him --- and not what we want --- and not just our feelings --- but His will and how He feels about things.

God’s got this.

God’s got us in His hands ---- we are just fine.

He who began a great work will see it through to its completion.

Today --- as always ----- we celebrate ----- and we gather around the goodness --- the beauty --- and the truth of God.

Today and always --- we celebrate and we gather around --- the saving love of God in Jesus Christ.

He who came and changed everything.

Today --- and always ----- we gather around ----- and we celebrate the grace of God and the compassion of God.

God is good.

God is gracious.

God is compassionate and loving.

God leads and guides us.

God wants what is best for us.

And so we submit --- and so we are obedient.

And so when God leads us into something a little different ----- we trust Him --- and we follow and we pray.

When we trust Him --- and follow Him and pray --- it never ever ends badly.

As Jonah said today in scripture -----

“I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

God is good --- God is faithful ----- God is holding us in the very palm of His hands.

We are so very blessed ---- by our ever so gracious and compassionate God.

Amen