

Jonah Chapters 3 and 4
(from The Message by Eugene Peterson)

From Anger to Pleasure

Anger seems to be in the air. It hangs around hospitals as protesters fight masks, vaccines, and vaccine passports, seemingly targeting those who are at their most vulnerable, whether tired hospital staff or fearful parents with a child facing cancer treatments. Anger is hurled back and forth as political candidates in our current election accuse each other of failures to deal with climate change, the pandemic, or clean drinking water, all promising that they can do better than the other. They talk over one another in debates, and once elected bang their fists on their parliamentary desks to show approval or disapproval like children who have not taught proper manners.

Anger is seen in the fight for safety and recognition for all who find themselves the victim of racism. Anger is there as people align themselves, or not, with the LGBTQI+ community. When those for and against abortion face off it is often not that pretty as angry crowds gather. Anger is in our homes and in our hearts. I don't think I have met anyone that hasn't experienced anger. Spend time with any two-year-old and you will find that anger is a pretty normal emotion, it is part of the package of joy, sorrow, fear, hope, humour and much more. It is part of being human.

The story of Jonah is a prime example of anger toward God. Let me take you back to chapter 4 verse 2. Jonah is a more than displeased with God for sparing Nineveh the wrath that Jonah figured was due to them because they had been a cruel and fierce people, threatening the well-being of the Hebrew people. In his anger, frustration, and sulking he says to God, "That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!"

Oh my goodness! That response reminds me of me. Eugene Peterson writes in his introduction to the book of Jonah, "One reason that the Jonah story is so enduringly important for nurturing the life of faith in us is that Jonah is not a hero too high and might for us to identify with – he doesn't do anything great. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire, we find Jonah as a companion in our ineptness. Here is someone on our level. Even when Jonah does it right (like preaching, finally, in Nineveh) he does it wrong (by getting angry at God.)"¹

¹ Peterson, Eugene H.. The Message (MSG) [The Message](#) Numbered Edition The Bible in Contemporary Language Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018.

A couple of things to say here, one is that God can handle you being angry at God. The Psalms are a testament to how God can handle our anger and all emotions as the writings are filled with the angst of human experience. Another piece is that God at times chooses to work with us regardless of where we are at. Jonah never stopped believing in God or God's power. In fact, he was sure that God had the power to change the hearts of the people of Nineveh and he wanted nothing to do with it. He preferred his anger to the pleasure of having the Ninevites know that God is rich in love.

Thing is God's love extended to the Ninevites and also to Jonah as well as the Hebrew people. By changing the hearts of the people of Nineveh, they would no longer have to fear the battles as they would longer be a threat.

Before we go further though, let's take a look at what type of writing was used for the Book of Jonah. Now it is very difficult to take this piece as decisively historical. There are references to Jonah elsewhere in the Bible and archeologists have found a mound as they have dug at the site of ancient Nineveh which is marked as "The prophet Jonah." Which in itself is interesting. We also know that Nineveh was one of the capitals of the kingdom of Assyria. So it is not that all the details are without merit. But there is no place in other historical writings or storied diagram or symbols that would attest to the truth of a whole city, with the influence and importance of Nineveh, turning to trust in the God of the Hebrews.

This story is what one would call a satire. So a little review from English class. "Satire is a technique employed by writers to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society by using humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule...Usually, a satire is a comical piece of writing which makes fun of an individual or a society to expose its stupidity and shortcomings."²

I have always thought that if we were made in the image of God and we have humour, God must appreciate humour as well. We like to think of the Bible as a very serious piece of work, and no doubt it is, but if we take out the humor, irony, and sass, well, we can miss the point of why a story like Jonah is in the Bible in the first place.

Jonah is a story about going from anger to pleasure. God's anger is turned to pleasure when the Ninevites turn from their sins. The story is one of hope, new life, and the willingness to change. Stories like the book of Jonah have a way of telling us something about ourselves. Do we sulk when we don't get our way or someone else seems to be rewarded when they don't apparently deserve it? Do we judge others harshly when we ourselves are just as guilty of not always getting it right, when our words or actions are harmful to others?

Not unlike many churches, our congregation is looking at how we are to engage the conversations, world and community challenges that outside the doors of our sanctuary, because that is where God is at work. God is with us here as we worship, but God is not

² <https://literarydevices.net/satire/> Accessed January 20, 2018

limited by our walls, only we are. The same goes for our personal lives, we may have limitations on our ability to fully enact the changes we want to see around us, but God is not limited in that same way, so to align ourselves wholeheartedly to the love and concern God has for others, for those who are particularly at risk of exploitation and hardship, is to see the pleasure of God at work and being partners in it.

I have heard it said, "The church does not have a mission; God's mission has a church." We are the church whether we are gathered in a building together on a Sunday morning, worshipping online, going to work, bingo, a concert, or a rally. The church gives us a place and opportunity to listen and learn through study and conversation whether or not our hopes align with God's. What we look for in the church is wise counsel with one another as we do this work of discerning together, asking for the Holy Spirit to be present among us, guiding, teaching, comforting, and challenging us to go beyond our comfort zones, beyond our fear of the unknowns, from our places of just being angry and self-righteous, to forgiving, loving, and welcoming. From anger to pleasure in all that God has in store for us and for those who we feel shouldn't receive God's sheer grace, mercy, love and program of forgiveness! Thanks be to God that God's got this. Amen.