

**Jonah 3:10 – 4:11**  
**Matthew 20:16**  
***“Being First, According to Jesus”***

September 24, 2017  
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We’re coming at Jonah through the backdoor this morning. The story of Jonah, as it appears in the Bible, has four chapters. We’ve heard read just the last chapter in which Jonah is having it out with God for making Jonah do something Jonah didn’t want to do.

“Jonah, I want you to go to Ninevah and preach destruction and judgment upon the people living there. Tell them that I’ve been watching and that if they don’t get their act together, they can expect a visit from me.”

But starting in chapter one and continuing through chapter two and three, we’re told that Jonah didn’t want to do that. Jonah didn’t want to go to Ninevah. Now you’d think that some people, if they got this assignment from God, would love it. Go and preach judgment. Go tell them how wrong they’ve been. It almost wouldn’t matter who the audience is. Some people would simply love to get this assignment. And you would think Jonah might have been one of them.

Did you know that if you go to Baghdad, Iraq today, which is on the Tigris River, and you go up the river for about 200 miles, on the eastern bank of the river you’ll find the ruins of the ancient city of Ninevah, the grand and violent capital of Assyria, that nation which once upon a time destroyed Jonah’s nation? God isn’t calling Jonah to go and preach judgment on Disney World. God’s calling him to go and preach it to his most mortal enemy. Think about who that would be for you. Wouldn’t you like to get this assignment just a little bit? But Jonah doesn’t want to go to Ninevah. In the end—in the part of the story we’ve heard—he tells God it’s because he knew God wouldn’t follow through. That Jonah would get to Ninevah, tell the people that God couldn’t stand them and their wickedness anymore and God was coming to wipe them off the face of the earth, but then God wouldn’t. And this would be an embarrassment to Jonah, because Jonah’s not the kind of person who feels he can afford to be wrong when it comes to God. For from the very beginning, almost the first thing we’re told about Jonah is that he is a Hebrew and the son of Amittai.

Did you ever meet someone who, every time you ran into them, they gave you their resume? Hello, my name is David. I was born in the U.S., ivy league educated, ordained minister, originally from Mansfield, Massachusetts, son of Jon and Martha Pierce. It’s

almost like they don't really know who they are without having to prove themselves. That's Jonah. He's a Hebrew. This alone says a lot about Jonah. It says that his faith is very deep. It's the faith of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and the Exodus people. Here is a man who loves his country, who believes that God meant it when God said, "You alone of all the nations of the earth I have blessed." Jonah is a Hebrew, a member of God's own household. If there is a line in the sand somewhere, Jonah knows which side to be on, and which side God is on, and it is *not* on the side of Ninevah.

So what does Jonah do when God calls him to cross into enemy territory? Jonah goes down to the docks and gets on a boat headed for Tarshish, to get as far away from Ninevah as he can. Most of us probably know the story of Jonah well enough to know what happens next. Out on the sea God sends a storm, and Jonah's shipmates, suspecting that Jonah might have something to do with it, throw him overboard. Out in the middle of nowhere, Jonah gets swallowed up by a giant fish, which is where he stays for three days before God has him coughed up on dry land again, because for as much as Jonah wants to resist God, God will not resist Jonah.

"Are you ready to go to Ninevah now, Jonah?"

And Jonah said, "Alright God, as you wish."

And there, just outside of Baghdad Jonah preached. He didn't expect anyone to listen, but they did, and there was a national turning...and there was a turning in God, who said, "I will not destroy this city."

But Jonah couldn't stand it. He just couldn't stand it, and he lets God have it. "O Lord! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place, because I knew you wouldn't go through with it. Not that I'm blaming you. You are a God of grace and mercy. It wouldn't be like you to destroy people. But what did you have to drag *me* all this way for?"

Jonah can't stand it. He just can't stand it. Sometimes, sometimes the hardest thing to take is grace when it's given to someone else.

God asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Our text says in verse 5 that Jonah "went out of the city and sat down east of the city—on the side opposite the river—and made a booth for himself to hide out in. And God appointed a bush to grow up over Jonah to give him some shade for his discomfort." To

really understand how this bush over Jonah's head came to be, it's necessary to know that in Hebrew the word *appointed* also means *ordained*. In other words, God ordained a bush for Jonah. Later on, God will also ordain a worm to eat the bush, and this will make Jonah furious.

In our church setting, we don't talk a lot about ordination, because the only one among us who is ordained is me. I remember when I was ordained to the ministry, my church at that time, along with representatives from the denomination, stood around me. They laid their hands on my head and shoulders and spoke words of encouragement and challenge to me, reminding me of my gifts and of my responsibility to use them not only in service to the church but to the whole world. They gave me a robe and put stoles around my neck, they prayed for me and promised to keep on praying.

When someone is ordained they are designated, set apart for a holy calling, and in many church settings—Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian—this kind of thing happens not only to ministers but also to those who become elders or deacons. In the case of deacons, they are set apart to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of the poor, whether it be the poor in body or the poor in spirit. They are not, however, separated out from the poor. I've made the terrible mistake before of thinking that my ordination means I am more special, more important, and just plain old better than all the rest. That it means I can keep my distance. I think God would have me know, however, that it's possible to be ordained and still be no better than a worm, if I use my ordination only to designate and to set myself apart.

This is, I think, the point Jesus is trying to make when he tells us, "So the last shall be first, and the first shall be last." There will come a day when those who have been in the lead will have to learn to follow; when those who have gotten to decide for others will have things decided for them. It shall be, says Jesus, and if this is the case then it stands to reason that those of us who are in first now ought to live with greater concern for those who are in last now, because our future depends upon them. But who are they? Who are the ones in last that shall someday be first? And when will it be someday?

I was deeply moved this past week when I heard that the government of South Korea has given \$8 million in humanitarian aid to pregnant women, infants, and children in North Korea. Though South Korea came under intense criticism from other countries,

including the U.S., for helping to lift the burden of a country that has long threatened the world with nuclear weapons, South Korea's unification minister said, "Today, we estimate that about 200,000 children in North Korea are affected by acute malnutrition, heightening their risk of death. It has never been our policy to stop at asking, who is our neighbor? The more essential question is, what is neighborly?"<sup>1</sup>

I don't know how you would answer this question. We know that those who are in first don't give up their place in the world easily. Jonah didn't. He didn't want to go to Ninevah, to get to the one place where he believed the grace and mercy of God would never go and there discover...the grace and mercy of God. And yet, if you are Jonah—if you're stuck in a world where there's no avoiding the storm, where hardship and calamity are bound to hit, where Ninevah is just another name for that place you can't get away from, where fear swallows you whole and the darkness can last for days—if you're Jonah, or just the person who has to live with him, it's got to be good news that there is no place, no place at all, where the grace and mercy of God can't get to you. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian*, "South Korea approves \$8m aid package for North Korea," September 20, 2017.