

What Makes Us Mad

Jonah 3:10-4:11

September 20, 2020

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

Jonah knows. From the minute God starts to speak in chapter 1, verse 1, Jonah knows. The book of Jonah starts out: Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' (1:1-2). Jonah doesn't ask questions, he doesn't make the typical excuses that someone called to be a prophet makes, he doesn't argue. He just hightails it in the opposite direction, because he knows. He hightails it in the opposite direction of Nineveh, and then pretty much anyone who has ever attended Sunday School or Vacation Bible School knows what happens next. He hops on a ship going in the other direction, there's terrible weather, terrible luck. Jonah knows what's happening with that, too. He says, "I'm betting it's me, because I'm running away from what God told me to do. You'll all be better off if you toss me overboard." So they do. And then the big fish swallows up Jonah travels in the direction God intended him to go, and spits him up at Nineveh.

God tries again. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, now that he was already in Nineveh. Jonah preaches the worst sermon ever preached, because he knows. The same thing that was true before the whole big fish episode is still true. And so Jonah, reluctant and recalcitrant prophet, walks through one third of the city of Nineveh, speaking the words that God has given him to speak to them: "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" That's all he says. It only takes one day. The king of Nineveh immediately issues a proclamation for everyone, even the animals, to fast and wear sackcloth, the traditional signs of repentance. Jonah hasn't even pointed out what their sins were, but apparently the king knows, and apparently the king knows about Jonah's God, because he hopes that God will be merciful.

Jonah had good reason to be unenthusiastic about preaching to the Ninevites. They were Assyrians, the same Assyrians who had defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They were powerful and used their power against Jonah's own people. The minute God said "Nineveh," Jonah had a powerful negative reaction, because he knew.

What did Jonah know? The same thing the king of Nineveh knew. The same words the Psalmist knew, that we spoke this morning in the call to worship. Jonah says, "I *knew* that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Jonah knew that God would send him to the Ninevites, into the heart of the evil empire, and that he would say what God told him to, and that if the Ninevites repented, well, then he knew what God would do, because he knew his God. God's mercy would outweigh anything else, and God would change the plan for Nineveh, for Assyria, and because Assyria would remain powerful against Israel, this would eventually doom the Southern Kingdom to defeat by Assyria, too, and lead to the exile of God's people.

Jonah knew that God would be merciful to Nineveh, and he wanted no part of that. That's why he ran. He confesses that to God. And he's mad. He's really mad, because God has been merciful to the worst enemy that Jonah knows. Jonah is so mad that he wants to die. Asks God if he could please die. He is really really mad. That the people of Nineveh are receiving God's mercy and will not be destroyed.

And then he goes and pouts. He goes out to overlook the city that he really wants God to destroy, but God is being God and being merciful instead. And he sits there and pouts. God causes a bush to grow, to give Jonah shade, and Jonah's happy about it. Then the next day, Jonah's still sitting out there pouting, and God sends a worm to eat the bush. Then there's a hot dry wind and a hot scorching sun, and people from Texas know how hot Jonah was. And he gets mad again, that God destroyed the bush.

God says, "are you mad about the bush?" And Jonah says, "yes, I'm mad about the bush! So mad I could die! Why did you destroy the bush?" And God says, why do you care about the destruction of the bush? You didn't make it, you didn't take care of it, you didn't destroy it? But somehow you care about the *bush* and don't care about 120,000 people, plus animals, in Nineveh, and you'd be perfectly ok if they were all destroyed? In fact, you're even mad that I was merciful to them!" This is a paraphrase, but I think God must be thinking, "Jonah, you sure get mad about the weirdest things. You're mad when I save a city full of people, and mad when I destroy a piddly little bush."

There are plenty of things to be mad about, upset about, sad about. Sad and mad go together a lot for me. For some people, mad and scared go together. There's plenty of sad and scared and mad. There's destruction and death—200,000 this year in this country from one virus, not to mention other diseases and disasters and wars and violence and accidents. People are angry about politics at all levels, and they're mad because they have to wear a mask, or they're mad because other people aren't wearing masks, or any other number of reasons. Humans are good at getting mad.

What is worth getting mad about? I suggest we use the book of Jonah as our guide. Not Jonah himself, for he clearly gets mad about the wrong things, even if he thinks it's for the right reasons. Jonah gets so mad because God acts exactly as God has been known to act—slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Jonah knows God will err on the side of mercy, and Jonah doesn't want that. Jonah is quick to anger, God is slow to anger. Jonah gets mad about God being God.

If we follow God's model of getting mad in the book of Jonah, then we will be slow to anger. We will grant every chance for mercy and repentance. When lives can be spared, we will not get mad, but will have compassion, on the humans and even the animals. We will hold to this, even when it applies to the lives of our most powerful enemies.

None of that is easy. It's easier and frankly, more satisfying, to get mad at our enemies and stay mad at them, and to in turn be mad at anyone who acts like our enemies are real people who deserve respect and compassion. But God calls us to something more difficult and deeper. God calls us to love our enemies, and the book of Jonah is just one place that shows us what that might be like.