

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Jonah 4:1-11

Sermon Title: "God is God, and Does as Only God Will" (In the Belly of a Whale Lenten Series)

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Jonah is angry. He is extremely displeased and terribly enraged. The people of Nineveh, along with their animals, are saved from disaster. God is raining down his mercy upon them. And Jonah is ticked.

Back in Chapter 1, Jonah runs away from God because he doesn't want to do what God wants him to do. Yes, it is a long journey away from Israel. Yes, Jonah will have to leave his comfort zone and visit a foreign land. But these are not the real reasons for why Jonah runs away. He runs because he hates the Ninevites. No, he despises them. They are foreign people with foreign gods, and so they do not deserve one ounce of mercy. They are so corrupt, so stained with deep sin, that God should blow up their city and wipe them off the face of the map. Jonah is honest about his raw feelings, but he is a prophet of God. God wants him to preach to those same people with whom he cannot stand being in the same room.

So Jonah visits Nineveh. He shares the word of God with those foreign people. They see their sin and

are humiliated. They are shocked, and choose to put on sackcloth and refuse to drink or eat, and that is a good thing. They repent of their deep sin. When we think of it today, we cannot believe that everybody, everybody, repents of their own sins. The whole city chooses God unanimously.

But Chapter 4 allows us to look into the heart of Jonah. For him all the sackcloth and fasting of the Ninevites was a bad thing. He didn't like seeing what he saw, all these good deeds and heartfelt actions. He wanted the people to perish big time.

It seems that, when Jonah shared his message of God, saying, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," he was hoping it would actually happen. He didn't think God's word was conditional: that if the people did do anything in 40 days, their city would be spared. Jonah believed God's word to be an immovable fact, something that could never change. It is like saying, "In 10 days and it will be the first day of spring. Summer is coming about three months from now. Christmas will fall on December 25." These are unchangeable facts. As Jonah was walking up and down the streets, proclaiming God's word, he might have been smiling to himself, thinking that all these people were going to die horribly. In 40 days, this city

was going to burn in a massive fire, or be swept up in a huge tornado, or something. Jonah might have been delighting in the fact that their sackcloth and fasting was not going to change their predicament. After 40 days, Jonah might have found a high mountain on which to sit, and have looked down on the city, and have glorified in the sight of watching it all explode in horror.

Jonah was afraid that God's word might be conditional. If forty days go by and the people do nothing – don't care about their sin – the whole city would be overthrown. But if the people repent, which they did, the whole city and its livestock would live again. Nothing would be destroyed in a puff of smoke.

In Chapter 4 Jonah is ticked. Jonah quarrels with God.

He blames God for having compassion on the city inhabitants. That's really odd. Jonah thinks it is a disaster that God held off his disaster against the city.<sup>1</sup> "I know you are a gracious and merciful God," Jonah says, throwing angry venom at God, "slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness, One who relents from doing harm."<sup>2</sup> Jonah knew God's character from the start, all the way back in Chapter 1. He says we

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<sup>1</sup> James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, cf. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Jonah 4:2.

talked about this, and that is why he ran away. Jonah seems to hold God accountable for not understanding him. “You knew that I hated these people, God. You knew how I felt about them.<sup>3</sup> But you still called me. You still wanted me to speak with them. And I did, and you saved them. Despite how I felt about them, you still went behind my back and saved them.” Jonah feels betrayed by God. God’s word was a word of judgment, yes, but judgment could be averted. It could be halted if these foreigners, wallowing in their deep sin, put away their foreign gods and repented. They did. God is glorified. Jonah is ticked, because he still wanted the Ninevites to be buried.

I was reading a book written by Eugene Peterson, who is a Presbyterian pastor and was a professor of Spirituality in Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. He wrote a book on Jonah, using it to speak about pastoral ministry. His last chapter deals with the last chapter of Jonah, and the main theme is “quarrelling with God.” Peterson says, “Anger is most useful as a diagnostic tool. When anger erupts in us, it is a signal that something is wrong. Something isn’t working right... [However] what anger fails to do is tell us whether the wrong is outside or inside us. We usually

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jonah 4:2 [We are not privy to this conversation, so I am speculating as to what could have been said].

begin with assuming that the wrong is outside us – our spouse or our child or our God has done something wrong, and we are angry. That is what Jonah did, and he quarreled with God. But when we track the anger carefully, we often find it leads to a wrong within us – wrong information, inadequate understanding, underdeveloped heart.”<sup>4</sup> I had to put the book down for several minutes to reflect on what Peterson said. There are times I have been angry with God. I have let God know exactly what I was feeling – there was no mistake. I felt as though God was pulling something on me that I didn’t feel was right. There is no way God would allow one thing to happen, or to allow another thing to continue to happen, because from my point of view they were wrong. They aren’t godly. I blamed God for not seeing this.

And yet, as angry as I could become with God, eventually I realized I was wrong. A light bulb always goes off in my head, and I soon see the thing I have been missing, and I feel a sense of guilt overtaking me. I realize I do not have the full picture. I do not understand how God is working in me and in this world. Even when somebody does something to me, and I complain to God, and feel justified in being upset, I still discover how wrong I am. It is not wrong

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 157.

to become angry – as Peterson said, it is a useful diagnostic tool to figure out what is not working. It is wrong to think that the wrong always happens outside ourselves. Even when we have been hurt by somebody and become angry with them, if we dwell on that anger, we discover something wrong within ourselves. God shows it to us, and help us to let go of the anger and find healing.

Jonah gets angry and blames God for wronging him. So Jonah leaves the city he hates, and makes a shelter for himself on the east side of the city.

God provides a plant for Jonah, a long and tall bush that grows quickly over Jonah to add more shelter from the sun.<sup>5</sup> Jonah is protected from the elements and he is happy. As intensely angry as he was with God, now Jonah is intensely overjoyed for the plant. He is a man of many emotions. The bush over him gives Jonah needed relief from his misery.

So, is God making up to Jonah by providing him added shelter? Does Jonah think that God was wrong for making him angry, and so God is apologizing by giving him a plant to ease his pain? What Jonah doesn't realize is that the plant is another object lesson. God uses nature to get Jonah's attention: a

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<sup>5</sup> Jonah 4:5-6.

storm (Chap. 1), a whale (Chap. 2), a plant (Chap. 4), and then a worm. The story wants to make it clear, without a doubt, that God provides the worm to destroy the plant that protects Jonah. God also sends the scorching sun and the blinding wind to emphasize his lesson.

Once again, Jonah is ticked. God asks him if it is right for him to be so angry, and Jonah says yes. “I have every right to be angry, even to death.” That is intense anger. That is unnecessary anger. Jonah still doesn’t see the wrong within him. He still doesn’t get the full picture of what God was doing in him and in the Ninevites. Just as the Ninevites needed to repent of their deep sin, Jonah too has to let go of this anger, this rage, against those people and be thankful for God’s healing grace. Because the same healing grace that saved a city will also save Jonah.

We may become angry with God, and we may feel correct in sharing such anger. God will not thump us for being so angry. God allows us to share every emotion with him, even if it is hate, even if it is rage. God then shows us the wrong within, and we are embarrassed. We are ashamed. God doesn’t want us to remain embarrassed and ashamed. God wants us to understand. God wants us to grow.

God is God, and we are not. Steven Curtis Chapman makes that plain in one of his songs, “God is God, and I am not. I can only see a part of the picture he’s painting. God is God, and I am man. So I’ll never understand it all, for only God is God.”<sup>6</sup> When Moses is introduced to God for the first time, God gives the name I AM WHO I AM.<sup>7</sup> Not “I Am Who You Want Me To Be” or “I Am Whom You Can Manipulate.” Karl Barth was a German theologian during World War II, and he said that “God is as God acts... God does as God does, and what God does is love.”<sup>8</sup> God is going to love us as only God can. He may provide lessons, he may provide a simple word, he may provide anything to demonstrate how much he loves us.

It is God’s prerogative to destroy a city or not. It is God’s prerogative to correct the wrongs in people’s lives, and he does it all out of love. Not out of vengeance, not out of callous disregard.

Karl Barth also said that God is love, but we cannot presume to know the character of God’s love in advance. In other word, we may never predict how God is going to love us or others. We cannot bet on how God will reveal his love to us or to another person, because God’s demonstration of love will always be

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/God-Is-God-lyrics-Steven-Curtis-Chapman/47AC742EF91F7ADA48256D760027C9A7>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Exodus 3:14.

<sup>8</sup> John R. Franke, *Barth for Armchair Theologians*, 124.



what we don't expect. It will always surprise us.

God is God, and we are limited human beings who depend on the love of God. "The specific way that God loves is through an ongoing establishment of communion between God and God's creatures. God's love for the world is not that of a passionless Deity, but rather that of [a Father] who is passionately involved in the [lives of everybody,] and pours out this love lavishly in Jesus Christ."<sup>9</sup>

Jonah and we have no right to dictate to God what he must do next. We may become angry, we may share our thoughts and feeling with God, but we can go no farther. God is God. We are his creatures, more specifically his servants. Our job is to receive his love for ourselves and also to spread it around to others. Our hope is that people would hear God's word, and know the love of the Father through Christ the Son, and be restored to new life by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 4 ends with a question. Not many books of the Bible end with a question mark. The ball is in Jonah's court: Stay angry or become thankful. The Book of Jonah ends with the vast contrast between Jonah's ungracious heart and the kind heart of the Lord. How does Jonah spend the rest of his days

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 127.

knowing about God's kind heart? Peterson asks, "Does he angrily stomp back [to his home country] and try for another ship to Tarshish, fleeing again from the presence of the Lord? Or does he stick it out in Nineveh, living into the largeness of God, embracing the surprising and past-understanding mercy of God...?"<sup>10</sup>

The Book of Jonah ends with a question mark, drawing us into the story, so much so that we become Jonah. We stand before God next to a withered plant and a worm crawling around the ground. "Just as you had pity on a bush that you did not plant," God asks us, "should I not have pity on 120,000 people and their livestock, who are too dumb to know their left hand from their right?" You know, sometimes we forget which hand is our left and which is our right, and we are so grateful that God is around to show us.

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<sup>10</sup> Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 197.