
Jonah: The Mercy of God

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Salmoon Bashir
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In the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen!

Week after week, you hear from this pulpit about living out a Christian life: love, prayer, forgiveness, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness.

And today, the Scripture is about the mercy and compassion of God. The tenderness of God. You already guessed that Jonah is the person to talk about when it comes to God's mercy and compassion. Because Jonah has just experienced it himself.

Remember what happened to him. If I had to make a list of the top three funniest stories in the Bible, Jonah would definitely be at the top of that list by far. I mean, think about this story. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, and Jonah said NO. He ran in the opposite direction. Then he ended up in the belly of a great fish. He prayed to God, and God gave him another chance.

God gave Jonah life. And now, after receiving that mercy himself, Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches his famous five-word sermon in the original Hebrew. Probably one of the shortest sermons, and it became the most successful sermon ever preached.

After hearing Jonah's sermon, the people of Nineveh repented from their evil ways, even their livestock. And God sees their repentance and decides not to destroy them. The funny thing, or the right word could be the human thing, is Jonah gets angry again!

And he says to God, I knew you were going to do this. I knew it! I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Jonah is not surprised by God's mercy. In fact, Jonah is angry at God's compassion and mercy.

And I think that is where this story becomes very uncomfortable for us. Because many times we are very comfortable talking about God's mercy and compassion when it is about us.

God forgives me. God gives me another chance. God understands my failures. God knows my heart. We love those things about God.

But then God extends that same mercy to somebody else, and suddenly we have questions. Then our piety, compassion, and mercy turn into US versus Them.

You are going to forgive them? You are going to give them another chance? You are going to show compassion to them? We become so exclusive about God the moment the same mercy and compassion that we experience is extended to someone else.

If we are being honest, we think God's mercy should have boundaries. We are happy to receive mercy, but we are not always happy when someone else receives it.

Especially when that someone belongs to our category of "those people." That is what is happening with Jonah. Jonah has his people, and the people of Nineveh are not those.

And Jonah doesn't think God's mercy should cross that boundary. But God does. God's mercy is bigger than our categories. God's compassion is bigger than our boundaries.

In the words of an old hymn, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea, and the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind."

God's compassion moves across the boundary Jonah has created.

Jonah thinks that God's mercy should be controlled by him, but friends, God's mercy is not controlled by us.

Jonah was living thousands of years before social media, but sometimes I think he would have fit right into our cancel culture. If someone's morality does not match ours, we want to cancel them. No mercy. No compassion. No second chance. You don't deserve to experience the tenderness of God. We want mercy for ourselves, but judgment for others.

Jonah received God's mercy. But Jonah does not want Nineveh to receive it also. And I think that is the real struggle in this passage. Jonah doesn't have a problem believing in a merciful God. He has a problem believing that God should be merciful to the people he does not like.

I find Jonah uncomfortably familiar. Because sometimes, personally, I want people to deal with the consequences of their actions. We all have a little bit of Jonah in us.

Sometimes I want God to say, yes, you are right. They really do not deserve another chance. But God keeps showing us that His judgement is different.

We want vengeance but God wants to save. God says that there is still room for mercy.

We decide that someone is defined by their worst action, their worst mistake, their worst moment. No mercy. No compassion. No second chance.

The text actually tells us that God changed his mind about what he had planned for Nineveh. And I love that about this story. Because God's mercy is not theoretical. God sees that the people have turned from their ways, and God responds with compassion.

God gives them another chance. And another chance. And those chances continue until the people of God, who are made in the image of God, turn back to Him like a prodigal son.

Friends, if we are being honest, Christian life is about second chances. Peter denied Jesus. The disciples ran away when Jesus was arrested. They failed Jesus when he needed them the most.

And yet Jesus did not give up on them. To the same disciples who disappointed Jesus at his hour, Jesus extended a hand toward them after his resurrection. Jesus came back to them. He loved them till the end.

And maybe some of us know something about that kind of mercy. Have you ever been there? I have. I have been there.

When I know that I have disappointed and angered God through my thoughts, words, and deeds, and I know I don't deserve a second chance. When all hope is lost, then the hand of God, full of compassion and mercy, abounding in love, comes and embraces me.

A reminder comes that says, I will never give up on you. And friends, God will not give up on you either. God never gives up on His people.

Jonah may have lived thousands of years ago, but the human heart hasn't changed that much.

We still have our people. We still have our enemies. We still have people we think deserve God's judgment. And God keeps surprising us with mercy. God's desire is not to destroy people but to give them life.

This is where the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard we read today can help us understand God's generosity. It goes beyond our numbers, our timing, and our ideas about who belongs inside and who belongs outside, who is first and who is last.

The workers who worked from morning until evening got angry at the landowner because he extended that same generosity to others who arrived late. Their question was, why are they receiving the same generosity?

When the landowner asks the workers, "Are you envious because I am generous?" That is the question for Jonah. And maybe it is the question for us too. Can we accept it when God shows mercy to someone we think doesn't deserve it?

God wanted to save Nineveh. God is not finished with Nineveh. And God is not finished with Jonah. And God is not finished with us either.

So perhaps the prayer for us today is: as God changed God's mind and offered mercy, compassion, and life to Nineveh, so should we.

May the mercy and compassion of God echo in our hearts too as we leave this place today and go into the world to love and serve the Lord and extend that mercy and compassion to others.

As God changed God's mind and offered mercy, compassion, and life to Nineveh, so should we.

Amen.