

### Jonah 3

Think of someone you can't stand. I know you can, because I can. We all have people who even thinking about them makes us feel uncomfortable, makes us angry. We remember what they said about us, we remember what they did to us.

Now imagine they just won the lottery. How does that make you feel? Pretty irritating, right? "They deserve to get the bad things in life for how they are and what they do, and they get all that? Not fair."

Now think of someone who is just straight up evil. Not like "run of the mill evil," like we all are. I mean a special kind of evil. Serial killer, terrorist, abuser, dictator. Like just terrible, gross, evil. Someone who needs to be in jail and we all know it.

Now imagine the judge lets them off scott-free. How does that make you feel? Maybe a little bit angry, hopefully. Because it isn't fair, and it sure ain't justice.

You see, we live in a world where many people say they hate God because he lets evil happen – we can and have spent hours addressing that. But the funny thing about the man in our reading today is that God's prophet Jonah hated God because he was too merciful.

If you recall this awesome, true story, Jonah didn't want to go to Ninevah because Ninevah was full of people who were evil, idolatrous, depraved, sick, and mean. It was a city that prided itself on lust and indulgence and wickedness. And if someone spoke a word of truth or caution, they weren't welcome. Ninevah was kind of like our culture where anything goes, everything must be tolerated, and if you say otherwise you are hateful, mean, and unwelcome - except it was way worse.

So Jonah didn't like Ninevah. It was a city full of people he couldn't stand, who were downright corrupt. And so he, just like us, wanted bad things to happen to those people. And here God was telling him to go preach to them! And Jonah didn't want to because he knew what would happen: they would repent and God would have mercy on them just like he always does.

Jonah's job was to go to the person he hated the most, the one he held all the grudges against, and give them the big lotto winnings check. His job was to go the serial killer and undo their cuffs, when he really wanted to watch them fry. Would you want either of those jobs? So cut Jonah a little slack.

I can't say those jobs would be much fun. He certainly didn't think so. So he ran away from Ninevah and, God, when his dumb prophet wasn't willing, used a dumb beast, a

fish, to turn him around. But Jonah wasn't willing because Jonah is just like us. We have a skewed sense of justice, of good and evil, and a skewed sense of self. One that makes us think we are better than others and that we deserve better things than others.

Don't get me wrong, the dirty, rotten, scoundrels of the world need punishment (that's why God gives us laws and government and courts), we uphold temporal and government punishments. But how easily do we conveniently forget all the ways we are dirty, rotten, scoundrels ourselves. Sure, "we know we aren't perfect." And while it is really easy to say that, it's a little harder to say that we are the ones who think the same thoughts of the murderers, and the sex offenders, and thieves. The real scandalous truth about ourselves, revealed so perfectly in the Bible, is that while you aren't the biggest jerks out there, while you aren't the killers, even as Jonah was a prophet of God unlike the evil Ninevites, the thoughts of hatred, lust, and violence are in our heads too. And if we remember our Lord's sermon on the mount: thinking the thoughts puts us in the same category. And if that weren't enough, we do act on them too as we hate, as we lie, as we steal, as we fight, as we curse, as we cheat – in big ways, in little ways. Romans 3:23: "All have fallen short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10 and Ecclesiastes 7 both teach, "No one is righteous not even one."

Which is why every Sunday we remind ourselves of it. We confess: “We deserve thy temporal (now) and eternal (hell) punishment.” Because if we are honest, we know we don’t deserve the lottery check from God, but the electric chair. It’s true. Never ask God for what is fair, never ask God for what you deserve. Because God demands perfection. Because God is just and he wants good, only good. Not pretty good. Not, “the person sitting next to me is worse.” Not, “the person I hate is worse.” Not, “the Ninevites are worse.” No, he demands it all from all of us. And we, just like the people next to us, and the ones we hate, and the Ninevites, fall short. And He is a good judge who will not let the evil get off scott-free. Punishment must be paid, blood must be shed, and someone or something must die.

But we see today it’s not the Ninevites, no he relents of their punishment, he forgives them, much to Jonah’s chagrin. And the beautiful Gospel, good news, is that you don’t pay the price either. You don’t get the punishment, not the eternal one. Because while God is perfect and just and righteous and hates evil, he is also merciful. So he relents of the disaster we deserve, he doesn’t hold a grudge against us, because he Sent a greater prophet, Jesus.

At the end of the book of Jonah, after he has done his preaching, he finds a beautiful spot overlooking the city of Ninevah, there, under a broom tree, he waits to see if the fire from

heaven will rain down and kill the Ninevites. Oh, and he wants it to, he has his popcorn out. He is left disappointed.

Many years later, Jesus is on the mount of olives overlooking Jerusalem, but he doesn't have popcorn waiting for judgment, he weeps. He cries for that city that rejects the preaching of the prophets, that rejects Him and his grace. This is the One greater than Jonah, who brings the mercy of God. He is the One who listened perfectly, he never held grudges, and he never thought the thoughts of hatred, or lust, or greed, and he never acted like it either. He was perfect.

And if you want to talk about not fair, think of Jesus. The One man who deserved every lotto check, who rightly owned, even as he Created, all things, who had done no crimes. That God-man, was betrayed, and mocked, and tortured, and killed, and he suffered hell – the wrath of God, being separated from the Father. The Father did not relent of the punishment. Because he took all of our punishments, and Ninevah and Jonah's too. And that is the mercy of God, that he would punish evil in Himself, that we might be set free and forgiven even though he has a million reasons to hold a grudge against us. Ephesians 2:4-7 “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses (like the Ninevites), made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” That is the mercy of God, that he would

send a Savior to take our punishment. Thank God we don't get what we deserve, thank God Jesus didn't –but he does now, as he is Risen and reigns to all eternity.

God has the highest standards, but his mercy is abounding for all. Which is why he lets evil happen, because if he wiped out all evil, and one day he will, if he wiped out all evil, he would have to wipe out *everything* and he wants to wait so people can hear and repent just like Ninevah. So he lets this dark world spin on so his light can shine to more people, because he loves them too. He waits because he is merciful, and he waits that more may be saved. He waits because of Jesus, who died that we might have life. He isn't holding a grudge against us, he likes us and wants good things for us.

So maybe we can let some of the grudges go too. It isn't easy with people you can't stand. But forgiveness is a choice, make it. The feelings may come, they may come later, they many never come. But do it anyways. Especially our brothers and sisters in Christ - God forgives them, why don't we? Or are we a greater judge than Him? I don't think so. Let us share the beautiful mercy he has shown Ninevah, Jonah, and us. Giving us what we don't deserve, good things, even eternal life – let's share that hope and promise with a world that doesn't deserve it, but desperately needs it. Amen.