

To Endure the Beams of Love

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Jonah 3:1- 4:1

Twenty - Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Scripture Introduction:

Back in May I wrote for our newsletter that this summer I would be sharing Biblical perspectives on some controversial topics—and today's is the last of the summer. We've touched on grace and law, on marriage and civic responsibility—and there's been this sweet theme of dance running through it. Today's sermon is about justice and the integrity of God—and the death penalty. There are many Biblical texts that could inform this discussion, but the book of Jonah is particularly apropos. We pick up the story after Jonah has already been swallowed up by the big fish and spewed out on the shores near Nineveh. Jonah 3:1 – 4:1.

Sermon: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We are here (on this earth) to learn. “We are here to learn to endure the beams of love.” That is William Blake, mystic poet of the 18th and early 19th century.¹ Blake asserts, based on his reading of Scripture, that the purpose of our human existence is to “learn to endure the beams of love.” That thought is also at the heart of the book of Jonah—and thus at the heart of the entire prophetic tradition.

To endure the beams of love. I don't think we usually imagine Jonah as a terribly important book of the Bible nor as having such an exalted theme: to endure the beams of love—isn't Jonah mostly a fish story? It's a children's story—right? I know when I first got to seminary, I thought for sure I would find Gepetto in here somewhere. Where's the sneezing whale? Oh, that's Pinocchio—and Disney! This is Jonah.

Jonah is one of the literary gems of the Old Testament. It is an epitome of prophetic literature. It's a farce, a tragedy and a parable—much more than a children's story. The book of Jonah sets God against God's own prophet. It sets the freedom of God against the demands of justice; God's wide mercy against the measure of the prophet's mind; sets our repentance after judgment beside our change through mercy, and it sets the Changeableness of God next to the Faithfulness of God. Jonah illumines all these; the theological insights are vast... And then the whole carefully crafted narrative culminates in one freeze-frame moment at the end that holds all this together.

¹ William Blake (1757–1827), British poet, painter, mystic. From “The Little Black Boy,” in Songs of Innocence, collected in The Complete Poems, New York, Alicia Ostriker, ed., Penguin Books, 1977. The actual quote is “And we are put on earth a little space, That we may learn to bear the beams of love...”

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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Jonah is (I think, surprisingly) one of the most important books of the prophets; Jonah is an epitome: the story of all the prophets. Here is the standard outline of a prophetic book: Israel disobeys God. The prophet condemns Israel to exile, as punishment they go into exile..., and then Israel is restored.

In a bit more detail: Israel disobeys. By “Israel” I mean the rulers of Israel, the elite and powerful. And their disobedience, when we boil down all their idolatry and faithlessness, Israel’s essential disobedience was that they oppressed the poor. The rulers were, as Amos says, “grinding the face of the poor,” by “selling the needy for a pair of sandals.”²

And all the prophets, God’s defenders of the poor, “*proclaim the message God tells them,*” and condemn this sin. And importantly they condemn Israel’s disobedience unequivocally.

The condemnation was, “You are as good as dead. You failed. You are dead man walking.” Micah says, “Your wound is incurable.”³ “You will be sent into exile.” The verdict was guilty as charged. There were no conditions; no options and no plan for rehabilitation, no, “If you repent, then we’ll see.” The prophets said, “You blew it and you will pay.” And the rulers indeed went into exile as punishment. Each prophet contains each successful prophecy.

And then comes... again in each prophetic book, there comes... this critical twist—a critical [arch back] change. This change is at the heart of the prophets. In spite of every unequivocal condemnation that God instructs the prophets to swear against Israel, God relents. God forgives. God sends them back to the promised land. God changes God’s mind. This is the line at the climax of today’s reading: “*God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them.*”

And by that change Israel doesn’t die, but lives—the verdict is overthrown. But this really creates problems for the prophet whose word is everything. The prophet proclaims the message that God tells the prophet to proclaim. And, if what the obedient prophet says is true, then the gavel has come down, Israel is condemned, and that’s it. If, then, God changes God’s mind, if God contradicts the prophet’s earlier word, Israel is delivered from death, but the prophet is hung out to dry. Every prophet who obediently and correctly condemned Israel to exile stands in this jeopardy. That’s all of them—and the book of Jonah is the place where this issue with the prophets is confronted: If Israel is saved, the prophets are liars. That’s the background of our Scripture today.

So, the story of Jonah itself is fairly simple. First, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Out in front of the Children’s Museum, I was watching the mother of a not quite two-year old. Mom was holding the car door and gently saying, “Come on, Honey, it’s time to go, time to get in the car,” and at that word the

² Amos 2:7 and 8:6

³ Micah 1:9

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little girl took off on her little stumpy legs in exactly the opposite direction, yelling, “No, no, no, no, no, no!” I think her name was Jonah. Obedient prophet that Jonah is, he takes off on his stumpy little legs in exactly the opposite direction of Nineveh, toward Tarshish. Why does Jonah turn heel on God? Because Jonah knows what’s going to happen, and if we’ve read the other prophets—Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos---we know, too.

Jonah turns heel, because of what we’ve just learned: God changes God’s mind. Every prophet---after being right in condemning Israel, after the guilty verdict is passed [middle] and they’re sent into exile [right], then God restores them---all the prophets become a pack of liars. They all said truly, “You will pay for this with your lives,” and then God changed God’s mind: Israel was granted clemency.

Jonah is no fool. He knows this, and he doesn’t want to end up like the rest of God’s prophets. As soon as God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and to condemn them without qualification (just like Israel)—not “Shape up or else,” but “You’re gonna die,” *Nineveh shall be overthrown*—, Jonah turns hell and sets sail for Tarshish. That’s the opening image in the book.

And then the literary genius of the book kicks in. The narrative repeats a pattern several times, and then it begins the pattern one last time... without resolution.

Here’s how the pattern goes. The ship with Jonah sets sail for Tarshish, and is in peril right away. The sailors cry out to God for deliverance and throw Jonah overboard to save their ship. Well, the ship is saved, but now Jonah’s in peril; he’s in the water. Jonah then cries out to God for deliverance, and he is saved—by a fish who swallows him up. But now Jonah is in a new peril and he again cries out to God, and again is delivered: the fish spews him out onto the shore near Nineveh.

But now Nineveh is in peril, because Jonah is finally there to condemn them. Jonah does condemn them, and, repeating the pattern again, in jeopardy Nineveh cries out to God for deliverance, and they are saved.

Now, they are saved because God changes God’s mind. But, since God has changed God’s mind, now Jonah’s in trouble yet again. He’s angry. He’s been made a liar. And, above all, he’s on the outs with God—in jeopardy. He’s rejecting God. This is the question the book asks, “Will Jonah cry out to God—and then be delivered, as God has so faithfully done before?” It’s happened again and again. Jonah himself has cried out twice and twice been delivered, but will he now a third time?

Jonah is sulking outside the walls of Nineveh. Our text says: *When God saw what the Ninevites did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. And this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he was very angry.* The Hebrew for Jonah’s being “displeased” is “Jonah thought it evil.” This is displeasing in the extreme to Jonah; he

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thinks it evil what God has done, and he is fuming, gnashing his teeth at God. And what is so displeasing, even evil to Jonah is that God changed God's mind and did not bring judgment on Nineveh.

Now, Jonah's not an irrationally vengeful soul. Jonah simply wants to preserve his integrity, and he also wants God to show the same integrity. Jonah wants God to follow through on what God said, what God professed—he wants God to be consistent. There is a character named Cain in the book Come, Sweet Death;⁴ in this poem Cain bellows at God, "Your reputation is well-known. Deity should be made of sterner stuff."

That's Jonah's line: "Deity should be made of sterner stuff."

Jonah isn't an irrationally vengeful soul. Remember what Jonah is facing. Jonah, prophet of God to Israel, is one of those chosen by God to advocate for the poor. From Elijah's caring for the widow's son to Amos' condemnation of those "grinding the face of the poor"—this is the prophets' call, their identity: to care for, to speak out for, to claim God's own justice for the poor. And Jonah's beloved poor have been ground into the dirt by the elite; they have had their lives taken from them. This is the very offense that God condemns through the prophets. But the story of the prophets is also that God forgives—even this sin. God restores that very sinful Israel. Jonah's rage, Jonah's unrepentant rage is based on his connection to—his affection for—those who have been wronged. He's not irrational.

It wasn't until I could feel Jonah's affection that I could even understand his rage. At my best, I am able to forgive those who injure me; I can, I have, by God's grace, been able to get over it and let it go. AA teaches that "hate is the poison we drink hoping it will kill the other person." Sometimes I remember that well enough to forgive. But if you hurt one of my loved ones, if you hurt one of my sons...

Most of their girl friends I've met, and I know I unconsciously give them a look that says, "If you break his heart, I'll break your legs." That's an exaggeration; it's the anonymous perpetrator that... if I imagine the boys' being hurt in some random drive-by or some stupid crime... just to imagine that... I can feel rage well up in me.

And when they are hurt, the best way, sometimes the only way I can get off my vengeful feelings, is if they let me off. The boys each have a way of saying, "Yo, Dad, get over it. Let it go, dude. I'm over

⁴ Come Sweet Death: A Quintet from Genesis by Bunyan Davie Napier—out of print. Napier was a professor of Old Testament at Yale Divinity School and "Come Sweet Death" comprised some of his imaginative chapel sermons.

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it—chill, man.” That’s the music of grace, the hip-hop beat of mercy. And that usually does it: a whiff of their mercy can turn my heart.

But then, then, what happens in that most awful circumstance when they can’t offer to get me off it? If their voices are silenced...? If, heaven forbid, one of my children should be murdered, and they cannot offer or teach forgiveness to me, then how do I find anything but vengeance, rage, in my heart?

You see how we have now come close to the public conversation about the death penalty. What I’m going to offer here is not all that can be said about the death penalty, but where we are now is precisely where the book of Jonah intersects with this question.

As a proud Michigander, I was pleased to learn that the State of Michigan has never had the death penalty. I read that “Michigan was the first English-speaking government in the world to abolish totally the death penalty for ordinary crimes. It was voted into law on May 18, 1846, and has remained so since. And, although the death penalty was kept on the books for treason until 1963, Michigan has not executed any person since statehood.”⁵ That’s as good as the weather this last week. But, according to a Gallup Poll, about 2/3 of the American public are in favor of the death penalty. In my former state they still execute people at San Quentin, just a stone’s throw from our former churches in the Bay Area.

Years ago, when the Robert Bork confirmation hearings were being held, I got interested in reading court decisions. Robert Bork was an eloquent proponent of the death penalty.

Bork’s justification of his view, he wrote, was that “...the death penalty is the expression of society’s moral outrage at the breaking of society’s rules,” and that “the venting of moral outrage performs an important if not necessary social function.”⁶ The death penalty is the socially necessary venting of moral outrage. ‘Moral outrage’—that is what Jonah is expressing. His moral outrage at Nineveh and his moral outrage at God. This is his moral outrage: “Come on,” Jonah says, “Come on, God, be of sterner stuff. Their sin warrants death. You said so yourself, God: *Nineveh shall be destroyed*. So, have a little integrity! Show a little follow-through! Have a little backbone, God!” To invoke the governor of my former state: “God, you’re such a girlie-man!”

Clearly God is not the man Jonah is. Thank God.

⁵ Wikipedia: “Capital punishment in Michigan.”

⁶ At the time of Bork’s nomination, American historian William McFeely wrote on the history of the death penalty. The following are all from William S. McFeely, Proximity to Death, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999.

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In this pivotal book of the prophetic tradition (the tradition of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of Micah, Amos and finally also Jesus) God is intent on mercy, and Jonah is in jeopardy, because he is caught in his own intractable, unchanging view of who he thinks God ought to be. He's righteously angry and alienated.

God's own prophet is set against God, yet God is insistent on this mercy and trying even to draw Jonah back into the life of God again. The book will leave us worrying, asking, How can Jonah move away from "venting his moral outrage"? On what basis could Jonah change his mind or repent? Jonah's not irrational, so then is God irrationally merciful, just begging Jonah to "be nice?"

On what rational basis does God or Michigan (!) reject Bork or Jonah's theory of venting moral outrage at the breaking of society's rules? The simplest rationale was written by Justice Thurgood Marshall. In this opinion he doesn't sound much like Jonah, he sounds more like Jonah's Boss. Marshall wrote, "The death penalty itself is a violation of society's rules."⁷ Maybe the rationality of mercy is simply that God's law is intended to ameliorate our baser instincts, not institutionalize them.

This is not all that can be said on this issue, yet Jonah puts a question squarely before us. It asks: Are we here to vent our moral outrage or are we here to learn to endure the beams of love?

That's where the book of Jonah leads us; there's a coda, the whole pattern repeated again at the end of the book when Jonah sits under the bush, but the tension stays. Jonah is a parable, an unresolved question. "Will Jonah be delivered? Will he cry out to his God?" Every time so far God has responded faithfully, trustworthily to people's pleas with mercy and deliverance, but now for the plot to complete its final turn, Jonah is going to have to plead. And for Jonah to plead, he will have to change his mind, be changed by the mercy that God is showing Nineveh. If he is going to be saved, Jonah will need to repent.

Jonah needs to repent. It's easy to get distracted here and focus on the Ninevites' repentance—to see a rule here: e.g., that the Ninevites repented and thus God showed them mercy—well, maybe, but this book doesn't focus on their repentance.

The book of Jonah does not point us to the Ninevites' repentance in response to God's judgment; but points us to Jonah and whether he will repent in response to God's mercy. The book of Jonah points us to the prophet Jonah, to the child of the covenant, to the children of the covenant; it points us to ourselves, to the invitation to us to repent in the face of God's mercy.

The book of Jonah is ultimately not about Jonah but about God.

⁷ William S. McFeely, *Ibid.*

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This is the theological problem of this critical book: Israel, the people of God, like Nineveh, can't be saved unless God changes God's mind. So, God's changeableness [arch back] is critical. Well, there is something genuinely unsettling about a God Whom we cannot precisely predict, but we also cannot be delivered unless God is free to change. It is the living God who saves—not a static, unchanging, object-like God. This God—who changes his mind or her mind and refuses to be channeled into our expectations—this God is the only One who can save us—One wider than the measure of our minds and expectations. And thank God that this is the nature of our living God—trustworthy, yet changeable, and so free of our control or our manipulation.

I said both trustworthy and changeable. The necessary changeableness in God does not mean that God is frivolous. God is not flippant or willy-nilly, not capricious or random. God's changing, God's freedom, is in service of something. It is in service of ... mercy. To get to mercy, God will even change God's mind. This is God's integrity: that God will even change God's mind to get to love.

And the question remains: can Jonah accept this free God and so be saved?

In the end Jonah is angry at the freedom of God—the freedom that violates Jonah's view of divine integrity with mercy; that violates his sense of justice with free grace. He's angry at it, and yet that very freedom is Jonah's ticket home to God.

The summer began with a sermon on the dance of the Trinity—the love, the dance at the heart of God—and our summer continued with a sermon about grace asking, "Would you like to dance?" There is one piece left. W.H. Auden once wrote: "I know nothing except what everyone knows—if there when grace dances, I should dance."⁸

If there when grace dances, I should dance. At the end of the book, Jonah is still refusing this invitation. He's the kid against the wall at the fourth grade party, glaring, arms resolutely crossed: "I'm not going to dance." There's wonderful music going on; there are people to dance with—but Jonah wants no part. Jonah, prophet, child of the covenant of grace, refuses to dance, like another son of the covenant, an elder son, who stood outside the party complaining, "when this son of yours came back... you killed for him the fatted calf!" Here God isn't even killing the fatted calf, just refusing to kill the Ninevites. But Jonah is petulant and stuck.

That is why William Blake said, "We are here to learn to endure the beams of love." It is a matter of endurance. It is a matter of endurance because we have a bitter unwillingness to allow for God's

⁸ W.H. Auden, "Whitsunday in Kirchstetten," Collected Poems, New York, Vintage International, 1991.

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freedom, even (or especially) if that freedom means mercy for someone else: a Ninevite, a murderer – a bitter refusal to allow God the freedom to be merciful. We resist the beams of love.

In the final freeze-frame, Jonah leans against the walls of Nineveh, which by the irritating mercy of God still stand. Jonah has drunk the poison of hate, hoping it would kill the Ninevites: arms defiantly crossed, full of outrage, resolutely resisting grace or dance. That is the final image of the prophet Jonah.

But the book of Jonah puts William Blake's caption beneath this picture and lifts a song above it. The inscription beneath Jonah's glower does not allow his rage to have the last word: *We are here to learn to endure the beams of love*. And there is music above, inviting us to the dance inside (sung): "For the love of God is broader than the measures of the mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind."

We are here to learn to endure those beams of love. Amen.