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Jonah 4:1-11 – *The Reach of God's Compassion*

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Jonah 4:1-11

<sup>3:10</sup> When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. <sup>3</sup> Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

<sup>4</sup> But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

<sup>5</sup> Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. <sup>6</sup> Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. <sup>7</sup> But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

<sup>10</sup> But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. <sup>11</sup> And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Think of a time when you’ve been most upset in life:

Maybe someone hit your car;

Maybe someone hit you;

Maybe someone was unfaithful to you...

Or said something that hurt really, really bad;

Maybe someone stole something from you;

Maybe it's when you got into a fight with a friend or a family member...

Your anger turns white hot...

And takes control of your mind and body.

This is Jonah.

Jonah is beyond mad.

It literally says, "It was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and it burned to him." (Bryan Estelle)

Why is Jonah so angry?!

Something great has just happened:

The whole city of Nineveh—

All 120,000 people...

Animals included—

Have turned from their evil ways.

The whole city of Nineveh repents...

And they cast themselves on God's mercy!

You'd think that as God's prophet—

A messenger with God's message—

That Jonah would have been full of joy seeing an evil people repent.

And, if not happy over their moral correction...

Maybe Jonah would have at least felt a little accomplished in his task:

"I preached my message and people turned to God!"

"Job well done, prophet sir."

But Jonah is beyond mad.

He sees the Ninevites turn from their wicked ways;

Then he sees God turn from his wrath against them...

There's no joy, congratulations, thanksgiving, or feasting...

There's no offer to stay in the city and disciple these people...

Only white-hot anger and a dejected Jonah.

So, what's going on?

Jonah is an Israelite...

A proud Israelite.

And in the OT Israel is *God's* nation...

They're the people that God specifically chooses.

God frees them from slavery in Egypt;

Makes a covenant with them at Sinai...

Promising to lead them into a fruitful land;

And he promises to be their God...

Protecting them from their enemies.

Being an Israelite was a position of privilege:

"Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises," says Paul. (Rom 9)

For many Israelites this is an exclusive club...

God chose *these* people and *only* these people to receive God's favor...

(It's a more caustic form of "If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much.")

Assyrians though are not Israelites...

They are actually Israel's enemy...

And Nineveh is the heart of Assyria.

All Nineveh is good for is being reduced to rubble, thinks Jonah.

Not only are they *not* Israelites...

They're pagans who do terrible things.

Jonah wants these people destroyed.

Why would God turn his wrath away from Israel's enemies?

Why would God even give them a chance to repent?

Why is God extending compassion to these morally destitute people?

Why is God opening the door for these people to come into the exclusive club?

Jonah has no compassion whatsoever for Nineveh...

“And neither should God,” he thinks.

Let me ask you...

Who are your Ninevites?

Is there a person or a people group that you struggle to extend compassion to?

Maybe there's a bully at school...

Someone who constantly rides you for no good reason...

You think, “There's no way I'm showing pity or concern to that jerk.”

Maybe it's people you are forced to come into contact with at your job...

People who have recurring issues.

You see moms who are hooked on drugs—

Who have trouble parenting their young kids—

And *you* have to watch the kids suffer.

Yet they continue on the drugs and they keep bringing more children into the world.

Or maybe it's men who move from one woman to the next...

Leaving a wake of single mothers parenting children on their own...

Struggling to get by.

Do you struggle showing compassion here?

Maybe it's the rich executive, banker, or government official...

Who only seems to be concerned with their own wallet and well-being.

Maybe it's people who commit sexual offenses...

Like this man who lured and abducted this 13-year-old girl from Edmonton.

You think, “He and people like him need to burn next to the Ninevites.”

We're not so different than Jonah.

We look at how some people live and we scoff...

Saying to ourselves (or maybe aloud):

“I can’t believe they live like that.”

“They’re not worth the air they breathe.”

Or we look at them from our place of privilege—

From our exclusive group—

And we say, “No way are they getting in...”

“No way are they having dinner at my table.”

“Don’t let them move next to me.”

“No way are they sitting in our pews at church.”

“No way are they getting into our country and taking our jobs.”

Like Jonah, we struggle to extend compassion to people...

People who aren’t like us...

People whose way of life we disapprove of.

We get stuck in our own righteousness...

And miss the God who is reaching out past our human-made boundaries.

Because, for as much as this chapter is about Jonah’s angry response—

Jonah’s lack of compassion—

It is equally—if not more so—about the reach of God’s compassion.

**God extends his compassion even to the wayward Ninevites.**

God extends his mercy to people outside of the covenant...

Non-Jews...Gentiles!

God extends his concern to people who were violent, wicked, and unjust.

And, in his compassion to *Jonah*...

God explains himself.

God gives Jonah a window into God’s own heart...

And he uses a little plant to do it.

Conditions in Nineveh (northern Iraq) aren't easy...

It's sunny, hot and dry.

After the Ninevites repent...

Jonah leaves the city in anger and disgust.

He makes a little shelter and plops himself down in the hot sands outside of Nineveh...

Hoping to get a front-row seat to Nineveh's destruction.

The Lord causes a plant to grow up over Jonah's head...

It brings Jonah some relief from the hot sun and he's really happy about it.

The next day God sends a worm to chew through the plant so that it dies...

The hot winds kick up and it feels like Jonah is in a convection oven.

So an overly dramatic Jonah complains to the Lord about the plant:

"I'm ready to die."

"I'm so angry about this plant, I could die."

"Really, Jonah?!", God says...

"You care this much about a plant that you didn't even water or cultivate..."

"A plant that was around for 1 day"?

"You care this much for something so insignificant..."

"What about Nineveh?"

"I created these people..."

"I *did* cultivate them":

"I sustained them, giving them breath, food, and drink..."

"I allowed them to have children..."

"I fed their animals..."

"Should I not have compassion on my own creation?"

"Should I not care for those who are spiritually blind?"

God has compassion not just for the weak and helpless...

He has compassion for the strong and mighty. (Bryan Estelle)

Not just compassion for those wandering through life aimlessly...

But compassion for those actively breaking his moral law.

God extends his compassion to the undeserving...

Because his love is rooted in their being created by God.

If you read the statement from the family of Noah Madrano—

The 40-year-old man who took and assaulted the 13-year-old girl from Edmonton—

You begin to get a feel for what God's heart is like toward his creation.

“We love Noah unconditionally, which includes loving him even through the most unthinkable of acts.” – CTV News

“We don't condone, excuse, or minimize these acts...” it goes on to say...

But there is a love and compassion that never turns away.

This family probably has in their mind Noah as a baby...

Cooing and giggling...

Wobbling around taking his first steps;

Growing up and learning how to ride a bike...

Sending young Noah off on the bus for his first day at school.

Holding him when he fell and scraped up his knee...

Going into his room at night when he had a bad dream.

Through the brokenness...

Through the perversity...

Through the sin...

This family loves their son.

They brought him into this world...

And that's hard to let go of...

Think about the love you have for your creation!

How much more does God show compassion for his creation!?

God sees his creation—

People who cannot tell their left from their right...

Yet people who God brought to life—

And he loves them and longs to see them flourish...

He longs to be in a healed relationship with them...

Where he is their God...

And they are his people...

Worshiping him and turning to him for all their needs.

The reach of God's compassion extends well beyond what we think it does...

Even well beyond how far we think it *should* go.

He is a gracious and compassionate God...

Slow to anger and abounding in love.

And this is good...

Because we need it.

We may not be bullies;

We may not be unfaithful to our spouses;

We may not assault minors...

But we are no less in need of God's compassion and mercy.

Because we all have need:

Like Jonah we run away from God's call...

Trying to do life on our own...

The way *we* think it should go;

Like Jonah we look down at people from our ivory tower...

Waiting for God to smash them;

Like Jonah we plea for help and then refuse to give it to others;

Like Jonah we fight to keep our privilege and status...

Neglecting to share with others what has been given to us;

And like the Ninevites we hurt each other;

Like the Ninevites we abuse our power;

Like the Ninevites we do things that break God's moral law.

Yes, we are all in need of compassion.

And thanks be to God, he extends it to us.

God extends his love and mercy to us without us doing anything to deserve it.

Like a concerned father or mother...

God sees us in our suffering...

And he gathers us up in his arms.

He sees that we are spiritually blind—

Needing his guidance and mercy—

And God rescues us in Christ.

He says, “Come to me my children.”

“Come find healing in me.”

“I know you’ve sinned.”

“I know you’re hurting;”

“I know you’re tired...”

“Come to me and know that I am gracious and compassionate toward you...”

“Cast yourself upon my mercy...”

“And, in Christ I will show you boundless love.”

The book of Jonah points us to a God full of compassion...

Full of compassion for people who don’t deserve it.

But this is who God is...

And this is what *we* are called to as his people.

The ending of the book of Jonah is a cliffhanger...

We don’t know what happens to Jonah in the end...

Because the author’s concern and purpose goes beyond Jonah.

The book is concerned with the reader...

People who struggle to show compassion to those on the outside.

By ending the story with a question from God...

The author is forcing the reader to make a decision:

“Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?” asks God.

“What do you think, Israel, should I extend mercy to my creation?”

“What do you think, people of Trinity, should I love all of my creation?”

“Should I not love those who don’t look like you?”

“Should I not love those whose lifestyles you disapprove of?”

“What about you...”

“Will you extend compassion to My creation?”

“Will you open the door for people who aren’t like you?”

“Will you take the first step and reach out with love to a hurting world?”

“Will you tell people of my endless love in the Savior Jesus Christ?”

Let’s pray.