

Fronds and Anemones

Jonah 4:1-11 & Mark 12:38-44

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’

The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

After that no one dared to ask him any question.

“Fronds and Anemones”

Jonah 4:1-11

Rev. Leia Rose Lutz

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So...hi! My name is Leia and I started coming to this church a couple months ago after I got married and moved to the area with my husband, but before that, I was a solo pastor for seven years at a Presbyterian church in Michigan. Pastor Mike invited me to preach this morning and probably doesn't have any idea just what he signed himself up for, so let's DIVE IN.

But first, I have a question for you all: Do you have any enemies? I wouldn't say that I have any enemies. I've had rivals and people who have hurt me, but to call them enemies feels kinda melodramatic.

So when the Bible talks about loving your enemies, it can be hard to make that feel relevant to my own life, because I'm inclined to shrug and think, "yeah, I bet that it would be hard to love your enemies if you had them. Glad I don't have enemies, I guess."

Well, maybe I don't exactly have enemies. But there are certainly people in this world whom I personally find very very hard to love. And if I'm being really honest, there are a lot of people whom I just... I look down on. I know that I'm not better than anyone else, ...and *yet*. I think that there are a lot of terrible people in this world. I just don't consider them my enemies, because, like, most of them haven't hurt me personally, you know?

But I also know that these are exactly the people whom God is calling me to love. I don't want to, though. I'd really rather brush it off because maybe other people have enemies, but *I* don't...and there we go again. And that's not even touching on politics, because I think it goes without saying that there has been a lot of anger and distrust and fear mongering throughout this past election cycle in general and especially in this past week.

Anyway, today's story, the story of the prophet Jonah, is about loving your enemies, on a much larger scale. But I want you keep in the back of your mind that "enemies" are the sorts of individuals that we think are bad people, not just people who have wronged us personally.

And with the serious part out of the WAVE...please indulge me as I retell a Bible story with SHARKY, sorry, snarky and occasionally comedic commentary. So today I wanted to take the opporTUNAty to look at the book of Jonah. Also, prepare yourselves to throw out your net and CATCH a lot of fish puns...a HULL lot of fish puns...forty-three fish and maritime puns by my counting. There is a possibility that I may have gone OVERBOARD with them all. COD I share this story without fish puns? I mean, SHORE, but I'm DOLPHIN-ity not going to.

The book of Jonah is kinda unique in the Bible for several reasons, but perhaps what makes it most unique is that it was never written to be a history. It is not the biography of a real prophet who actually existed. The book of Jonah was written as satire. Everything in it is exaggerated for comedic effect, completely over the top, full of irony and slapstick action. In terms of tone, I'm actually not straying too far from the text with my weird retelling, even though I'm very focused on being a SARCASTIC FRINGEHEAD about it. And yes, that is a real fish, the sarcastic fringehead.

So once upon a time, there was this guy named Jonah, which means, and I am not making this up, "pigeon." Fun fact. Anyway, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and says, "Jonah! Go to the city of Nineveh and prophesy there." Jonah is supposed to go to Nineveh and prophesy, that is, he should become a missionary and bring people back to lives of love and justice because if they don't change the way they have been living, they're going to have an OTTERly bad time and maybe destroy themselves completely. They may be on their way to creating a TURTLE disaster, but there is still time to fix what they've broken.

But Jonah is not on board with God's plan. He says, "Yeah, no. Nope. No thank you. I have zero interest in being that kind of prophet and I sure as heck do not want to go to Nineveh, of all PLAICES! Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to just go find a boat and get as far away from you as I can. I'll find somewhere better to go, somewhere that people actually want to hear the

Word of God. Somewhere that I can meet a whole SHOAL of nice people, somewhere that I can make a lot of new FRONDS. Somewhere that I can kick back and relax, maybe adopt a nice DOGFISH, or even a CATFISH. Prophecy in Nineveh. Psh. What a load of POLLOCKS. There's no PORPOISE in going to Nineveh! No one there would even listen to me! They don't care about the Word of God. They're nothing like *our* kind of people. The Ninevites are our ANEMONES."

The Lord SEAS Jonah's temper tantrum and thinks it is absolutely adorable for Jonah to think he could run away, because there is nowhere that anyone could ever go where the Lord would not be with them. Jonah wasn't exactly a brain STURGEON. Anyway, now he's on a ship, but the Lord is laughing so hard that there is a mighty storm and all of the crew is in a panic, pulling down the sails, securing what they can, even throwing their heavy cargo overboard to make the ship lighter. There's thunder and lightning and waves crashing and the crew yelling. The storm is bad. It is really, EELY bad.

But while all of that is going on, you know what Jonah is doing? He is taking a nap!!! The captain finds him and wakes him up and tells him to pray to his god to save them all. After all, if everyone on the ship is praying to different gods, surely one of them is going to get it right, and that god will save them. It's a pretty superstitious crew, so when they're done praying, they cast lots to figure out whose fault it is that they're caught in such a terrible storm. That's not actually how responsibility works. Or how weather works. But, I mean, they do figure out it's Jonah, and technically, they're right in this particular instance, sooo...idk.

So the sailors ask Jonah who he is, and who his god is, and what Jonah could have done that would make a god so angry at him. And Jonah explains that he worships the Hebrew God, the Lord of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. The Lord had told Jonah to do something, but Jonah didn't wanna, so he figured he'd get on a boat and go somewhere far away and then the Lord wouldn't be able to find him.

"Are you even HERRING yourself?!?" the sailors started shouting. "Your god made the seas, but you thought you could hide from the Lord in a boat?!? How could SALMON be that stupid?!? It's your fault we might all be about to die!!! How could you be that SHELLFISH?!?"

To Jonah's very partial credit, he didn't try to plead not GILL-ty. Instead, he gets very melodramatic (this whole story is an exaggerated comedy satire, remember) and says, "oh, just throw me in the sea and save yourselves!" The sailors roll their eyes. They figure that if the Lord is punishing Jonah for going in the wrong direction, maybe if they just take him back in the right direction, it will be okay? They start rowing back to shore, but the storm just gets worse.

So, lacking any other options, they apologize...and throw Jonah into the sea. Maybe that will appease the Lord and stop the storm, and the sailors would be saved. Or...maybe they're all going to die anyway, and it won't really matter. But Jonah hits the water and just at that moment, the storm stops. "Holy CARP!" says one sailor. "Oh my COD!" says another sailor. "Lord KELP us..." murmurs another sailor. "Have mercy on our SOLES," prays another sailor. Every sailor on that ship is in such awe of what has just happened that they make vows to the Lord, the one who had sent a storm after Jonah. They agree that when they reach port, they will find someone who can teach them more about this amazing and powerful God.

Meanwhile, a large fish just happens to be swimming by and she swallows Jonah up whole. So Jonah is stuck inside the belly of this fish for three days and three nights, as you do. You'd think that he might take the opporTUNAty to do some self-reflection, but mostly he's just sulking. He does a lot of sulking. Jonah is like, o-FISH-ially the worst.

But then after three days, the fish vomits Jonah back up and he finds himself on dry land. Some Bibles prefer to translate that verse with the fish "spitting him out" or "releasing him" or something more polite, but the Hebrew verb is quite literally "to vomit" and I do not understand why you'd take an objectively excellent and hilarious image like that and make it boring.

But there he is, on dry land, blinking at the sun after three days in the dark, probably coughing a lot, getting all that water out of his LUNGFISH, and the word of the Lord comes to Jonah again, and says, "Jonah. What was it that I told you the first time, before you ran away?" And Jonah sighs and says, "You told me to go to Nineveh and prophesy to the people there. But I don't want to, because they're my ANEMONES, and they're LUMPSUCKERS, and it's a waste of time and I don't even know why you care about them when

they don't care about you!" And the word of the Lord sighs, and says, "Jonah. Go to Nineveh. I will tell you what message to give when you get there." And Jonah pouts and says, "ugh, okay, fine, but I'm not happy about it. Are you SHORE you can't send someone else...?" And the word of the Lord says to Jonah, "Jonah. Good REEF. Get up and go. Are you trying to give me a HADDOCK?" Again, Jonah is like, o-FISH-ially the worst.

So Jonah gets to Nineveh, which is pretty big. Ridiculously big. Like, unbelievably big. I literally mean that you should not believe how big it is, because the book says it took three whole days to walk from one end of the city to the other. That would be like walking from here to Plattsburgh. That is so big that it might even be bigger than the entire Assyrian empire (of which Nineveh was the capital city).

Anyway, despite his best efforts (worst efforts, really), Jonah is in Nineveh and now he's supposed to preach. So he spends one day walking through the city and calling out the Word of God that he has come all this way to share, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

That's it. That's his entire message. It's a really terrible sermon. He's not sharing good news. He's not encouraging people to act in order to prevent something bad from happening. He's just proclaiming that something bad will happen. And he's probably kinda smug about it, because he hates the people of Nineveh, as he's made abundantly clear. We get it, Jonah. They're your ANEMONES. You want to see them destroyed. But I guess the message actually works, because everyone who hears Jonah suddenly believes in the Lord and starts to pray and fast. Everyone. The Lord is thrilled that the people of Nineveh have turned from their evil ways and tells Jonah that the city will not be destroyed after all.

"Are you FLIPPING **kidding** me?!?" Jonah says. "Well, that's just FINTastic. I came all the way to Nineveh so I could watch them be destroyed, but now you're telling me that you **love** them and **care** about them and want them to **live**?!?" Come on, Lord! They're the worst! Smite them! Smite them all!"

Our second scripture reading this morning comes to us from the book of Jonah, chapter four, verses one through eleven. Hear now the word of the Lord:

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'

And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?'

And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.'

Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left?' This is the word of the Lord.

And the people of Nineveh lived happily ever after, I guess, although the book of Jonah ends somewhat suddenly, before we can find out whether Jonah CATCHES the point that the Lord is making, or whether he just throws himself down like a BLOBFISH and sulks until the end of his days. The story doesn't tell us *why* Jonah takes such issue with this city. Maybe Jonah has a valid reason to feel so much ANGLER. We don't know. The story was never really about the Ninevites, and how they found redemption. The story is about Jonah being furious that they could ever find redemption at all. The story is about how it's hard for any of us to swallow that God could ever forgive truly

terrible people. If we ascended to heaven, and we saw that God was having a tea party with Hitler, and the best friend who betrayed you, and the former partner who abused you, and the family member who was never there for you...could we accept that God had forgiven them (even if we couldn't understand it), or would we refuse to step foot inside the PEARLY gates? I don't know. We are only human. There will always be people that we dislike, or distrust, or look down on, or judge, or avoid. I hope that we will do our best to be kind and loving anyway, but because we are only human, sometimes it will be a struggle. I hope that when people genuinely change, we allow ourselves to see it and find a new way forward.

Fortunately for us, the Lord is bigger than we are. Much bigger. With grace enough and to spare—grace to love everyone, no exceptions, grace to forgive what *we* might consider unforgivable, grace to save us when we don't deserve it. We like to think that we are the good guys, that we are on the right side—the side of the Lord, the side of justice. But, like Jonah, what we often actually *mean* is that we hope the Lord is on **our** side, agreeing with **us**, distributing what **we** think justice should look like.

I am glad and grateful that the Lord we worship is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. I imagine that not many of you would disagree with that statement. But even so, even though it does conflict, I have to confess that there are people whom I wish the Lord would punish. I wish that the Lord would smite terrorist groups and rapists and people who try to scam the elderly. I do not love such people. I am not sufficiently abounding in steadfast love. But the Lord is.

And that's the point of Jonah. The story builds. It's big. It's epic. It's cinematic. It's about to reach a pivotal moment, when Nineveh will be destroyed, and Jonah will be vindicated for not believing that any of its citizens deserved a second chance. Jonah's idea of a happy ending would be great CLAM-ities; violent justice, and destruction. He wants to be able to say, "You see, God? You see how terrible they all are?!? I told you so!"

But God holds grace and mercy for everyone. Our ANEMONES are not God's ANEMONES. God wants to be a FROND to every person on earth. God's dream for us is to live in peace. Even so, our souls echo this prayer from Anselm of Canterbury, written in the eleventh century.

Let us pray:

Almighty and tender Lord Jesus Christ,
Just as I have asked you to love my friends,
so I ask the same for my enemies.

You alone, Lord, are mighty.

You alone are merciful.

Whatever you make me desire for my enemies,
give it to them and give the same back to me.

If I ever ask for them anything which is outside your perfect rule of love,
whether through ignorance, weakness, or malice,
good Lord, do not give it to them
and do not give it back to me.

You who are the true light, lighten their darkness.

You who are the whole truth, correct their errors.

You who are the incarnate word, give life to their souls.

Let them be reconciled with you,
and through you, reconciled to me.

Amen.

BLESSING AND GRACE

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of COD,

and the fellow...SHIP of the Holy Spirit be with you all,

and with all those whom you love,

and with all those whom God calls you to love,

FRONDS and ANEMONES alike.

From wherever you are, serve the Lord:

our Captain,

our sails,

and the wind that moves us across the waters.

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