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Jonah 3:1-4:5

O, Jonah!

I simply cannot resist Jonah. I have to preach with him every time he shows up on the lectionary cycle because he only shows up once every three years. But that kind of fits him, doesn't it? Poor Jonah. He is a minor prophet, the fifth one in a series of twelve in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. His whole story takes only four chapters to tell. And he only shows up one time every three years for preachers who use the lectionary. Poor Jonah. It almost makes you want to feel sorry for him. But it is hard to feel too sorry for him because he is so funny. As a matter of fact, I am convinced that one reason he is even in Scripture is to help us laugh, not just at Jonah, but at ourselves.

Jonah's story is serious satirical comedy. Let's do a recap:

**Act 1:** God says to Jonah, "Hey Jonah, get up. I need you to do something for me. Nineveh is getting way out of hand. Greed and nastiness are running the show. The people in charge are out of control. They are using and abusing anything and anyone they can get their hands on. And it is "trickle down" exploitation at its finest. No one is behaving anymore. Jonah, I need you to go and tell them that I know what they are doing down there."

And in response, Jonah gets up, just as God commanded. But then, instead of heading to Nineveh, he marches right down to the dock on the Mediterranean Sea and boards a ship going in the exact opposite direction as God's command. God said head east to Nineveh. But Jonah heads west to Tarshish. Now, did he go that direction because the people in Tarshish were less corrupt? We have no idea. My hunch is, however, that Jonah did not care if they were less corrupt or not. All he cared about was that they were NOT Ninevites. For you see, the Ninevites were on Jonah's list.

You know what list I am talking about, don't you? It is the secret enemy list. The one we all carry around with us, whether we admit it or not. It is the list that has on it the kid from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade who humiliated you every day on the playground, along with the names of the junior high "in group" who ostracized you every chance they got.

It is the list with the names of those whose political or theological convictions are just so completely opposite of your own that you can barely even articulate your distaste and maybe disgust with where they stand. That is the list I am talking about. So be honest, you've got one, don't you.

Why I bet if it were just you and me, you could give me at least five names off of your secret enemy list. You might even be able to tell me where they sit on a pew or the name of their church; their feelings about Tuesday's inauguration or their stance on the war in Iraq. Or, perhaps you would tell me the name of the parent who hit more than they hugged, or the name of the acquaintance who stole your innocence and trust. Those names would be on the list too, attached with great pain. We all have our secret enemy list. And we carry it around in our hearts, regardless if we want to cop to it in church.

Well, the Ninevites were on Jonah's list. He could not even stand the sight of them or the way the word "Nineveh" even felt in his mouth. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. It stood for everything that the Jewish people detested and dreaded. Jonah disliked them so much that he could not even fathom having to look at them or to speak to them. So he fled God's call, ran down to the dock, and boarded the boat to Tarshish.

**Act 2:** The big storm arises on the sea. The sailors cannot figure out what is going on until Jonah finally confesses he is fleeing from God. So they toss him overboard to save their own skins and to appease the

storm. Then God provides a large fish to swallow up Jonah to save his life. And while he sits in the belly of the fish, Jonah finally decides to start preaching (a little late if you ask me). And he goes into this very well-put-together sermon—a sermon, by the way, that uses the first-person singular (I, me, or my) 26 times in merely 8 verses, even though it is theoretically a psalm of thanksgiving for what God has done. Sounds like Jonah the preacher has a bit of an overinflated ego, a tinge of narcissism. And the fish must have thought so too because as soon as Jonah says Amen, the fish coughs him up onto the beach.

**Act 3:** Well, our God is an extremely patient God. Because God comes back to Jonah a second time and says “Get up, go to Nineveh and I will tell you what to say.” So Jonah gets up and finally trudges to Nineveh. Now, Nineveh was huge—sixty miles across. So Jonah starts walking and begins to reluctantly deliver his unbelievably short sermon. He walks and yells five Hebrew words over and over again that, roughly translated, mean “Forty days and Nineveh is toast.” “Forty days and Nineveh is toast.” He walks and yells and walks and yells, making his way into the center of the city. And we must notice that his sermon does not reference God in any way. Furthermore, it is in Hebrew, which the Ninevites may not have even understood. And yet—and this is where humor begins to raise its head again---in direct response to Jonah’s 5 word, foreign language sermon, the Ninevites do the impossible.

They repent. This minor prophet preaches a minor sermon in a minor key and all these theoretically horrible, evil, worthless, enemy-number-one people immediately respond. They repent. They are willing to turn from who they have been and turn to God. They believe. And not only do they believe their destruction was on the way, but they believe that God would give them a second chance. These no-good, no-account Ninevites declare a fast, put on sackcloth and dress for full repentance. The King even takes off his royal robe to put on sackcloth and sit in ashes. They even dress the dogs and cats and cows in sackcloth. They have little puppies in sackcloth chasing little kittens in sackcloth chasing little mice in sackcloth. Do you hear the laughter yet? There is not another city in Scripture that responds so quickly and completely to God’s word as Nineveh does. Their entire reality changes because of what God does with a minor prophet who preaches a minor sermon in a minor key.

And that is not all. The Ninevites were right in their assumptions that God’s mercy could include even them. God looks and sees what has happened and God changes God’s mind. What do you think of that? Not only do the people of Nineveh change, but God changes plans and decides not to toast Nineveh after all.

**Act 4:** Well, you might think that Jonah would be excited that the people responded to his sermon in such an amazing way. If he were a Baptist preacher, this would be the ultimate altar call. They heard the word and they repented and were born again. Thousands upon thousands would be streaming down the aisle of the revival tent singing “Just As I Am.” Jonah is on his way into the Prophet’s Hall of Fame. BUT is Jonah happy? Not one bit. Quite the contrary. Jonah is mad, mad, mad.

“I knew it. I just knew it,” Jonah pouts. “I knew it would turn out this way when you called me and that is why I ran away. I knew, God, that you were gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And now, thanks to all that, I do not get a ringside seat at Nineveh’s Armageddon. I just knew you would end up loving them and showing mercy. Just let me die.” His response is hilarious, isn’t it.

Jonah is the only person I know who takes a psalm of thanksgiving for God’s mercy and love and turns it into a psalm of complaint. He is frustrated because Nineveh hears the word and changes. He is angry because they are not allowed to be transformed people. They are supposed to be on his list-- enemies, people he could not stand to talk to, look at, associate with, or even share the same air. But they changed. And then, as if that were not enough to put him in a foul mood, God changes. Once again God lets God’s mercy be the last word and God welcomes them home. So Nineveh changes. God changes. But by golly,

Jonah isn't going to change. He would rather die than make room in his theology or religion for God's mercy for those people.

**Act 5:** Jonah continues to pout and throw himself a pity party. And I think God decides to have some fun with him. You know that when you are in the middle of feeling mad and sorry for yourself, if someone helps you laugh, it sometimes takes away the sting. So I think God tries to help Jonah laugh. God watches as Jonah goes to the top of the hill to water his grievance garden and cry in his drink. Then God causes a plant to grow up and Jonah discovers that he has a nice little shade under which he can more fully and comfortably sit and sulk. But then, God causes a worm to attack the plant and make it wither away, leaving Jonah's head to bake in the hot sun.

Jonah grows even angrier and even more hurt. "Come on now, God. You can't even follow through with your promise to smite my enemies and now you take away my shade? Just let me die." But God responds, "Oh Jonah, lighten up. If you can feel sorry for a plant dying, can't you feel any compassion for the Ninevites who were clueless when it came to faithful living? Can't you feel something other than hatred for them? And what about the cows and the puppies and the kittens and lambs? Didn't you get a kick out of seeing all of them wearing sackcloth and ashes? It was a brilliant move. Have you ever seen something so funny and so heartwarmingly earnest in your whole life?"

The End. That is where Jonah's story ends. Right there, with God's question. Right there, with the cliffhanger of "Did Jonah laugh?" What do you think? Do you think Jonah laughed? Do you think that Jonah's eyes were cleared and he realized what a fool he was being for trying to limit God's mercy? Do you think that Jonah had a "come to Jesus" moment and saw how silly he was being for trying to cut off God's long, embracing arms and water down God's salvific love? I sure hope so. I sure hope that Jonah found his laughter and took God's advice to lighten up and let God be God.

Because then maybe, just maybe after Jonah laughed so much that his cheeks hurt and his stomach ached, just maybe after he wiped away the tears that flow from such raucous laughter over his behavior and complaints, perhaps as he sat next to the withered plant, he took out his enemy list and prayed it might wither up and die too. And perhaps he wadded it up and prayed for the same kind of extravagant mercy to wash over him as it had washed over the Ninevites. Maybe Jonah's laughter helped him to finally realize that carrying around an enemy list only hurt him as it slowly destroyed his humanity from the inside out.

And besides, he had already learned that day that just because he does not like or understand someone certainly does not mean that God feels the same way. Maybe Jonah came to the same conclusion that writer Anne Lamott has come to: "When God hates all the same people that you hate, you can be absolutely certain that you have created him in your own image." Because that is what Jonah had been doing all along—trying to make God small and tame and controllable.

We don't know if any of that happened for Jonah. But, just as we did for the Ninevites, we have good hope that he, too, might be saved from his own destruction.

It is a funny story—a seriously funny story.