

June 16

Jonah - One of my favorites - four sermons online at www.ccomaha.org.

Everyone who has ever tried to run away from God or who has tried to refuse a task or burden which God wanted to give to them will relate very well to this Book and recognize themselves in its pages.

More than that this Book, perhaps as much as any other in the Old Testament, teaches us about the grace of God. God's grace streams out of the Book when you think about Nineveh -- the pagan metropolis, a city that by all accounts was as fit for judgment as any you could possibly imagine. Ninevites were known for brutality. They imported slaves after their conquests and abused them mercilessly. They worshipped foreign Gods. God could have, (and in Jonah's humble opinion -- should have) simply dropped the curtain on a whole civilization that had showed itself to be rotten to the core. Jonah hated these guys. He was not so much afraid, as he did not want to see them repent and find God's mercy. So he gets on a ship to Spain - the opposite direction of Ninevah.

He wants to be a prophet to his home country, and would even go to Spain. But in stubborn defiance, he WON'T go to Ninevah. I am wondering if you are ever like that - telling God the one place you won't go. The one person you won't reach out to. The one group that you hate and hope doesn't get into heaven...

So he's on this ship - the first place you see God's mercy. You know, the sailors are the first ones to find mercy. God saves their ship. Then Jonah finds mercy. The great fish was not a punishment for Jonah, but it was his rescuer! It gave him some think time, and then delivered him right back to Israel so that he could get the second chance.

(Oh, and by the way, some have questions about whether this is physically possible. It is possible for a fish to be large enough to swallow a man. It is possible for him to live inside three days. But even if it was not plausible, our God is a God of miracles. He is a God who can do anything! So a special delivery via fish intestines is quite within his grasp.)

instead of wiping Jonah out -- letting him die in the storm, or at the hands of angry sailors or in the belly of the fish or just letting Jonah go to Tarshish and rot ... Instead of any of those possible courses of action, God gives Jonah a second chance. Maybe you are wondering if you can get a second chance with God after you went AWOL on him. Try him. He is great at second chances.

So Jonah gets puked onto the shore. I don't think he has repented yet, because of what he does later. He still has his heart set on Jerusalem and Israel. I think the fish-puke scene is one more way God is saying "You make me sick."

Jonah is still resistant, though. His message - given in one day journey in a city that was easily 3 days' worth of journey - is this (flat) "Forty days and you'll be destroyed." You see, he hated these guys so much that he only halfheartedly brought half of the message of repentance. No hope, no life.

But God was in it. The king repents, the people repent. Everybody is in sackcloth and ashes. Even the cows are in sackcloth and ashes - (I have no idea what that is about.)

But God has mercy again. He gives grace to those who don't deserve it. The Ninevites are spared and even seem to become worshippers of God.

Jonah is the anti-hero of this book though. He goes to a cliff to pout, hoping to see the fireworks of a nuclear explosion over Ninevah... but nothing comes except a shade plant - which he likes very much. Unfortunately, God sends a worm that eats the shade plant. And at this point we note that God does a lot of sending...

He sends Jonah - who disobeys. He sends a storm - which obeys. He sends a fish - obeys. He sends a plant - obeys. He sends a worm - obeys. Think there is a lesson here?

Jonah pouts about Ninevah, and then he complains about the plant because it is hot and windy and sunny. Jonah feels like he has been treated harshly.

Then the book ends. God is speaking to Jonah. "You think you have a right to complain about a plant you did not plant or water or cause to grow?"

In Ninevah, I have 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left... and many cattle as well. (There he goes with the cattle again!) In other words - there is a large population who I created, I formed, I love I care about them and want you to care as well.

Then Jonah is the only book of the Bible to end with a question "should I not be concerned for that great city?" Wow.

God loves the city. He loves Omaha. He loves your city. He is concerned about every many woman and child. The lesson of Jonah is that we should be concerned too. Even if it is full of rabble rousers, heretics, enemies and evil people. God cares and so should we.

This is what grace is all about. The book of Jonah is our God of mercy and grace - and our response to be gracious and merciful people.