

## **There's a Wilderness In God's Mercy**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Nancy Turner Jones at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, January 25, 2009.

“Jonah, Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you!” Today’s Hebrew Bible reading begins in the middle of Jonah’s story – this ironic tale about the mercy of God and the relationship of the chosen people to other nations, a story about a recalcitrant prophet named Jonah and a giant fish. You remember the story from Sunday School lessons. God calls Jonah to go east and preach repentance to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh and instead, Jonah flees west, to a far away Spanish city, as far West as was known in ancient times. The text says that he goes “to flee from God.” And the reader might speculate that he flees out of fear, intimidated by the blood-thirsty city referred to elsewhere in the Old Testament as a place of endless cruelty, a city of blood.

No, Jonah doesn’t go to Nineveh and instead clamors aboard a ship, getting nearly everyone killed. A great wind comes up, a massive storm and the sailors regretfully throw Jonah overboard. You know the story. Jonah is swallowed by a great fish – a fish we have affectionately called a whale. After three days he is spit up on shore, unharmed, right next to a great city, you guessed it , Nineveh. And in today’s reading we hear the rest of the story.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give.” This time Jonah obeys – not because he wants to obey, but because he has no choice. Jonah stands outside what the Bible calls this exceedingly large city, a visit requiring three days, one of the greatest cities of ancient Mesopotamia in what is now northern Iraq. Jonah stands in a place as hostile to Israel then as it is now and so Jonah, a Jewish prophet, reluctantly becomes the prophet of doom to perhaps some of Saddam Hussein’s ancestors. He finds a convenient pulpit a day’s journey into the city and preaches to the Ninevites – to the people whom he hates. Ironically the trouble continues for Jonah because he has surprisingly spectacular results.

Jonah preaches – what is only five words in the Hebrew. “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” That’s it – and the King and all his subjects do something almost unheard of in the prophetic world of Isaiah, Jeremiah or Amos who preached for years with little results. In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed – that’s his sermon and the entire city turns around. God turns too – and wants to show Nineveh that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is pleased.

But Jonah isn’t. He should have been – we all could wish to be such an effective preacher. But, you see, Jonah resisted going to Nineveh, not out of fear, but out of contempt. The Assyrians had devastated Jewish cities and killed and deported Jewish people. His only consolation in all of this was their destruction. And God let him down. Jonah proclaimed destruction, wanted it in retaliation. He wanted revenge and wanted God to want it too. Jonah is offended, not at God’s anger, but at God’s mercy to these offensive people. Jonah’s simple message converted the largest city in the enemy empire and Jonah is so angry he could die.

He rails at God, “See, this is why I wanted to go far away from here. You always do this! Look at all those abhorrent people and you just want to be gracious and compassionate. It’s not fair – it would be better for me not to live to see this. Let me die.” The Lord responds by asking Jonah, “Do you have any right to be angry?” Jonah slinks off to the outskirts of the city, hoping God will send an earthquake or a fire after all.

As the story draws to its close there is another episode of comedy involving a big tree-eating worm. God appoints a wild bush to quickly grow up over Jonah’s head and shade him from the hot sun. It says Jonah was very happy about the bush – until the next day when the worm destroyed the bush and the shade that came with it. Once again, Jonah threatens to die and once again, God asks, “do you have a right to be angry about the bush?” “Yes, I do have a right – angry enough to die,” Jonah says.

Have you ever been that angry? Have you ever been blinded by that anger? If you have, you understand God’s final response and the moral of this tale. God said, “You are angry about the bush for which you did not labor and which you did not grow. Should I not be concerned about the 120,000 Ninevites?” How often do we want mercy for ourselves and revenge for others? How often do we hold onto anger instead of forgiveness. The divine question here points a finger at Jonah’s righteous indignation. It stands starkly against the compassionate nature of God.

The significance of this tale is demonstrated by the fact that the Book of Jonah, all four brief chapters, is one of the fixed readings for one of the holiest days of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, which ushers in the holy days of repentance. This story, this parable, this satire expresses the utter wideness of God’s mercy, mercy which is utterly beyond our comprehension.

How do we express this wideness of God’s mercy? How do we live it out? Who are the Ninevites in our own lives?

Last year journalist Bill Moyers<sup>1</sup> broadcast a commentary on a new book called Amish Grace. The book is the story of a small community of Nickel Mines Pennsylvania and the story of five little girls buried in their simple white dresses. On a cloudless October morning, under a blue sky that reminded some people there of 9/11, the school bell called the children in from play. At around 10:15, a local milk truck driver named Charles Roberts entered the school house bearing a small arsenal and a grudge against God.

After ordering the girls to lie face down on the floor, he called his wife on the phone and told her he was angry at God for the death of their firstborn daughter, nine years earlier. In execution style, Roberts began firing his semi-automatic pistol into the little girls lying on the floor. As police crashed into the school, he shot himself dead. As we would expect, the Amish drew together and mourned their children. But then ‘with a swiftness that startled the world,’ the stricken Amish did something remarkable – they forgave the killer, Charles Roberts, and reached out to his widow and children.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: Moyers, B. (2007). *Bill Moyers on the grace of the Amish*.  
<http://www.pub.org/moyers/journal/10052007/transcript4.html>

Three Amish men showed up one evening, to express their sorrow. Another called on the killer's father and for an hour held him in his arms. When Roberts himself was buried, next to his daughter, more than half the mourners at the cemetery were Amish.

Imagine - a world where each of us can live out the wideness of God's mercy. Imagine a world, instead of an eye for an eye, a world shaped by God's compassion and mercy. Imagine a world of justice and peace among all people. Imagine a world where everyone respects the dignity of every human being. In a few minutes we will baptize a young babe. Isn't that the kind of world we wish for her? Isn't that the kind of world we want her to know? That she and every child can grow into the knowledge that all are children of God and live in God's grace, a grace that shapes us, transforms our anger into divine forgiveness.

The Book of Jonah does not tell us the ending. We don't know how Jonah responded to God's final question "should I not be concerned about Ninevah?" In other words, God reminds Jonah of his mercy and steadfast love. And then God says, "That's the way I am toward you Jonah. Shouldn't I be that way towards Ninevah too?" We don't know Jonah's answer. Did he continue to reject the mercy for the Ninevites that he received earlier in the story? Did he lay down his bitterness and intolerance and embrace the love of God for all people. The Bible doesn't tell us. Maybe Jonah finally gets it – we don't know. The question is – do we?