

## **November 6, 2011**

### **Pr Ken DeFor**

#### **Jonah 4:1-11**

##### **Jonah's Anger**

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this 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.'

##### **Jonah Is Reproved**

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, and also many animals?'

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I can still remember the joy and relief at the sound of the garage door going up, as I knew of the safe nighttime arrival of one of our teenage drivers. If you've had or have a teenage driver in your family, you know of what I speak. Or receiving a doctor's report that the test result showed there was nothing life-threatening wrong. Or, after being without a job for some time, receiving a telephone call that there is a job waiting for you. Or celebrating someone's recovery from illness or even over a child picking up her or his room.

So it must have been that God breathed a sigh of relief: "When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them, and God did not do it." I am not sure what that calamity might have been, but heaven must have erupted in joy that the people of Nineveh had not rejected God's gift of grace.

The story of Jonah adjusts our image of God...or it should. We hear once again that God is not a judge, handing out fines and sentences for breaking laws...but a God seeking to forgive and save us. God is a God of grace, not one writing down our rights

and wrongs. God is a God of love, who forgives and forgets. God seeks to be in relationship with us, a God of great patience who even allowed Jesus to die on the cross to let us know this truth. Did you count the number of times God forgave Jonah and tried again and again to shape his faith? God was always walking with Jonah. Never once is there a hint that God was going to wash his hands of Jonah or the Ninevites.

Jonah had a difficult time accepting God for who God is. Jonah wanted hell for the people of Nineveh, and God wanted them as God's very own children forever and ever. What a faith-building hope to hear God say to Jonah, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" God even saves animals? Now, please don't ask me to do pet funerals, because my feeble faith is puzzled by this business of animals being in sackcloth and ashes. But remember that God so loved the whole world that God gave us Jesus. And God commands us to go to the whole world loving God, neighbor, and self.

The whole earth needs redeeming, and all is redeemed in Jesus, to use a churchy word. What I know is that this Jonah story tells us we are saved by grace, and in grateful, joyful response we celebrate and share it. This is what next Sunday, Consecration Sunday, is about. Money happens to be an important tool of this celebration and sharing.

There is another piece to this celebrating and sharing. It is Jonah's reluctance and then inability to share, celebrate, and then welcome the people of Nineveh into God's family.

One of the important parts in confirmation programs is a time for students to share highs and lows with each other. Leann has Family of Christ students doing this. It is important that in sharing we are caring, celebrating, mourning, supporting, caring for, and loving and forgiving neighbors. Faith and life are connected and faith needs to impact all of life—both the good and the bad.

A few years ago, my students wanted to talk about death. Two of their school classmates had died in car accidents. (Again—I'm always glad to hear the garage door go up late at night.) I asked the students what their experience was with death. The variety of answers included dying grandparents, aunts, uncles, and of course the two friends in the car accidents. Then one boy, now in the safety and caring of his confirmation class, told us his mother had frozen to death. Never before in public had he dared to share this. The class of teenagers, squirrely as they can be, surrounded this young man with hugs and tears and love. They were learning how to celebrate with and support each other in the highs and lows of their lives.

A number of years ago, we put together a whole confirmation program based on a theme that popped into my mind one day. The theme was about dusting off their Bibles and allowing this great resource, by which God speaks to us through the lives of others who believed in God, to be of use to them.

God, who loves and cares and graces our lives, has, in Jesus, opened up the prison doors and freed us from our sins. In response, we open up our lives and are open to the lives of others to care and love and forgive and celebrate with them. Even Jonah, in his heart, knew of the true God. He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

So we step forward in service and sacrifice, sharing the good news, always in response to God’s grace and love for us. Go farther to all—even the Ninevites.