



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Angry”

Jonah 3 and 4, selected verses
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Introduction to scripture reading . . .

Last week we plunged into Jonah’s story in readings from the first two chapters. If you missed the tale, here’s a recap: God tells a Jewish man named Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, now known as Iraq, with a history of brutality toward Israel. God gives Jonah a job—to preach repentance to Nineveh. But Jonah doesn’t like Nineveh. That’s putting it mildly. Jonah despises Nineveh. He boards a boat going in the opposite direction and sails away. God sends a ferocious storm. In order to save the crew Jonah jumps into the sea. He almost drowns, but God provides a big fish to swallow him up. Jonah spends three days in the belly of the fish—three days in a cold, dark place. Jonah prays for help. God hears and responds. The fish spews Jonah up on the beach, within walking distance of Nineveh.

And now listen for God’s Word as we read selected verses from Jonah 3 and 4 . . .

Last Sunday we spent time in the dark with Jonah, in the belly of a fish. This week, let’s not let the fishy part of the story distract us from other truths about ourselves found in the tale of Jonah.

Our former colleague Rev. Emily Corzine preached on Jonah last Sunday at First Congregational Church. Her good work inspires this sermon.¹

In our scripture God persists to make things right. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. This time Jonah goes. He half-heartedly preaches the Bible’s shortest sermon on record—only five words in Hebrew—“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4)

Jonah is the least committed, most effective preacher there is! He speaks five words to people he can’t stand and amazing things happen. They believe God and proclaim a fast. From the King to the animals, they all repent. They turn from their evil ways. God sees this, relents, and spares the city.

In response, Jonah makes a face like the raging emoji on our bulletin cover. He gets angry.

Years ago one of our kids got bullied, roughed up badly after school by a big kid. Our child came home crying. I was pretty calm when talking with the authorities. But inside, I could feel my parental anger escalate. In my gut I wanted more than justice, I wanted that big kid to pay! When Jonah’s stomach churns with anger, I know how that feels.

¹ Thanks to Rev. Emily Corzine, First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio, for permission to borrow from her sermon “O Jonah!” from January 21, 2018.

From Jonah's perspective those Ninevites deserve not only his anger, but God's anger, too. Jonah's fury erupts. The success of his preaching enrages him! In English, he's angry. In Hebrew, he burns, smoke streams from his nostrils. Jonah whines, "I knew this would happen! That's why I fled to Tarshish in the first place,"

for I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing (Jonah 4:2).

The outcome of his preaching humiliates Jonah. He pouts and stomps his feet. He acts like a toddler. Jonah rages at God for not being sufficiently angry with Nineveh. Really? Who does that? Who acts like that?

How many times do we sit like Jonah, feeding our anger? He sulks in the hot sun east of the city. He tells God he is "angry enough to die." Jonah holds on to his anger with all his might, and so his anger holds on to him.

Everyone experiences anger. Psychologists tell us that anger is a "secondary" emotion. It's what we feel after we feel something else, something that hurts. Anger covers up our first feeling, whatever just hurt us. After our child was bullied, anger moved in and covered over my feelings of helplessness and pain.

Anger is morally neutral. It is what we do with our anger that matters. Anger has a place in life. There are things in this world worth getting angry about, like cruelty and greed and injustice. Righteous indignation, right wrath, has its place. There are times to rise up, times to march, to resist unjust actions, to speak out.

We also burn with appropriate anger about more personal matters, like betrayal or some unfairness that's done us wrong. It could be a lie told about us, or cruelty directed at us. We respond with anger. It's normal to hold on to that anger for a time. But sometimes we hold on to it for too long a time.

Author and pastor Frederick Buechner has this to say about anger:

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.²

Periodically, pastors are invited to preach in ecumenical settings among our peers. A while ago I did just that, at another church. If I don't mind saying so myself, it was a pretty good sermon. After I sat down, the host pastor stood up and thanked me. Then he proceeded to preach what he clearly considered to be the correct understanding of my text. At first I thought, this can't be happening, but it was. I thought he would stop, but he didn't. He put me down publically, in front of my peers. I felt my anger rising. Later, I learned anger also rose in others who heard his impromptu sermon. In itself, that was gratifying! The thing is, to this day, when I tell the story I can feel my anger reignite. It still has the power to energize me. Just the memory of my anger functions like fuel, fuel that promises to take me somewhere good. But that promise isn't reality.

Anger may be a place we visit here and there, but going there regularly is dangerous, and living there, well, that's deadly. Frederick Buechner continues:

² In *Wishful Thinking*. Frederick Buechner weekly e-mail quotes. January 16, 2018.

The chief drawback [of feasting on your anger] is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”³

When we live in the land of anger, our souls corrode, our hearts harden, our lives may shorten. Anger can become a way of being in which we beat up ourselves and also those closest to us. It energizes us in a negative direction. Anger can give life a sort of bizarre, twisted purpose.

When God forgives the Ninevites Jonah sees red, his anger flares. Then he stews in his anger. He stews because he resents God’s grace. And so the story ends, with Jonah still angry at God and with God still trying to pierce Jonah’s angry shield. God gets the last word, arguing for divine pity for Nineveh, in the form of a question.

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? (Jonah 4:11)

Jonah doesn’t answer God’s question. What an abrupt, unsatisfying ending! The story ends in a standoff, unfinished. Jonah stews, smoke coming from his nostrils. God hovers.

I think it is precisely in those moments, when it seems impossible for anything or anyone to pierce our protective, angry shield, that God hovers with us. When anger is all that floods our hearts and heads, God helps us find a way through.

Yes, Jonah is a tall tale about a fish. It is also a story about each and every one of us. Even when we think we can’t let go of our anger, even when we stomp our feet and refuse to let go of our anger, God still pursues us. God hovers in love, undeterred by the steam we release. God hovers in love and will not let us go, because God doesn’t want us to become skeletons from feasting on our anger. That’s good news for those of us who stew today, and for those of us who will stew tomorrow. Amen.

³ In *Wishful Thinking*. Frederick Buechner weekly e-mail quotes. January 16, 2018.