

STORIES OF FAITH

Jonah

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PRAY

The Lord is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

The Lord is good to everyone.

He showers compassion on all his creation.

All of your works will thank you, Lord,
and your faithful followers will praise you.

(Psalm 145:8-10)

SETTING THE SCENE

It's important to know that Jonah is different from other Old Testament Prophets. This book in the bible does not focus on the words of a prophet but about one.

The book Jonah full it is full of surprises and contrasts and people who do the exact opposite of what we expect. It is full to the brim with satire, irony and humour, unexpected reversals and events:

- Jonah the Prophet – so called “man of God” rebels/angry/disobedient/unforgiving.
- Sailors on boat with Jonah to Tarshish are soft hearted and are not as immoral as often portrayed.
- Powerful King – cruel ruler of capital of Assyrian empire humbles himself after the shortest sermon ever preached. Even the kings' cows repent!

READ AS A GROUP

As a group, read Jonah 3:1-5; 3:10-4:10 (NIV or NRSV) aloud, each person reading out a few verses at a time.

Jonah ends with this unresolved scene: Jonah quarrelling with God under the unpredictable plant and God delivering a reprimand punctuated with a question: “And should I not pity Nineveh?” The tension is high: Jonah is angry with God and telling God off, and God confronting Jonah and calling him to account.

What happens next? How will Jonah answer?

We are not told and this is not an oversight. We don't hear Jonah's answer. The point is we're not supposed to – because this story is actually addressed to us! Jonah holds a mirror up to each of us.

Jonah is not so much a model of faith to live up to, rather a character that shines a light on all those things in us that need work, redeeming, healing, transforming. Through Jonah we see the worst parts of ourselves and character magnified and brought into fresh focus that ought to challenge us to core. This shows us that the life of following God is one that will expose our illusions and inadequacies and confront us where we need to grow.

QUESTIONS

1. How are you like Jonah?
2. What attitudes or actions towards others does God want to bring to your attention or change in you?

Moreover, what implications does all this have not only for how we look at our ourselves with honesty and how we see others, but for how we see God? These Stories of faith we're looking at the moment are not just about what Moses, Elijah and David etc.. can teach us about faith BUT also show us who God is and what God is like!

For me the Jonah story is amazing example of how God will not stop showing compassion and grace to us even when we are unable to extend that same grace to others; that God will not stop seeking to grow, mature, and work with us despite all the munted ways we try to get attention, approval and affirmation; when we judge others, let people down as a spouse, parent, friend, colleague, neighbour.

PRAXIS

Sit with this verse from Jonah 4 which says that God is “gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

1. Is that your image and experience of God?
2. If not, what image/s of God do you have?
3. What might God want to say to you about that?

Pray for anyone in your group who is struggling with their image of God at the moment of being gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love

CLOSING PRAYER

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen

