

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 24, 2017
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 145:8-13
Philippians 1:21-27
Matthew 16:1-20

Today's sermon begins with a question: How long has it been since you've "thrown" a good temper tantrum? When was the last time you fell to the floor, kicking and screaming at the top of your lungs, then held your breath until you turned blue?

And lest you adults think I'm only speaking to teenagers and children, think again. Temper tantrums have no age limitations. Adults are prone to them every bit as much as teens and children. If you need proof of this, then look not only to your own lives but also to our Old Testament and Gospel lessons this morning.

Our Old Testament lesson introduces us to Jonah, whom God called to go and speak to the city of Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian empire. Jonah turns and runs the other way, and ends up being swallowed by a whale before he finally changes his mind.

But Jonah had very good reason to run *away* from Ninevah rather than *toward* it. Assyria was the most powerful empire of that day, and it was ruthlessly violent toward its conquered enemies. The Assyrians were responsible for

destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and for subjugating, taxing, and oppressing the Southern Kingdom into ruins.

Assyrian kings proudly boasted about their violence toward the children of Israel. I saw this week pictures of King Sennacherib's royal palace in Ninevah, where there are graphic depictions of Assyrian soldiers hacking naked Israelite men to death. Entire rooms of the palace were dedicated to showing this kind of barbarity.

The Assyrians were brutal, violent, and vicious. They were the kind of people folks loved to hate. So when Jonah finally answers God's call to go and declare God's judgment on Ninevah, he does so, no doubt, with a great deal of satisfaction.

His message to Ninevah is probably the shortest sermon ever recorded. In eight words, he says: "Forty days from now Ninevah will be destroyed." There is no mention of mercy. There is no weeping or lack of sleep from Jonah. Just the glib message that in less than a month these violent reprobates will be worm food.

And at this point the plot thickens. You see, the typical experience of the prophets in the Old Testament was such that the people to whom they preached were stiff-necked, rebellious, wicked types who were quicker to kill the prophet than take seriously his message.

Remember Isaiah? Isaiah responds to God's call and says, "I'll go and preach for you!" To which God replies: "Good, but just know that the people will listen to you but not hear you; they will listen, but they will not obey, and your ministry will be an uphill struggle from the beginning."

Remember Jeremiah? God tells Jeremiah that he will encounter such fierce opposition that Judah's kings and priests would oppose him, and that he would end up standing alone with no one but God standing with him (Jer. 1:17-19).

Very often the typical prophetic pattern goes like this: the prophet preaches, but the people oppose and reject both the message and the messenger.

Until Rev. Jonah goes to Ninevah and delivers his eight word sermonette. When the people of Ninevah hear Jonah tell them that in a month the whole shebang is going to fall like a house of cards, guess what happens? Out comes the sackcloth and ashes, and it's like a big tent revival. The king tears off his royal robes and joins the people, and there is genuine repentance.

And the text tells us that when God sees this change of heart and mind, He changes *His* heart and mind. God has mercy on them and rescinds His order of destruction.

And therein lies a problem. God, like a lot of *human* parents, sometimes changes things up. God sometimes rewrites the script. God sometimes decides to take a different road than the one originally chosen. God, who knows the number

of hairs on our heads and who keeps track of everything, *sometimes stops counting*. Wonder of wonders, the God who is merciful, slow to anger, and full of unfailing love, often steps in and proves it in the lives of real people!

This is a wonderful thing, of course – except to those of us who like to count and keep score. And in that sense, Jonah was very much “one of us.” Jonah has a real problem with God’s change of mind and heart. And in an exchange that would be comical were it not so serious, *Jonah tells God that he would rather die than live to see the Assyrians receive God’s mercy*.

Did you catch that?

The human heart is a mysterious and complex thing. It clings to bitterness like a dog clings to a meaty bone. Even among followers of Jesus, bitterness and resentment can take root so deeply within us that we would much rather die than to forgive others. It is easier for us to cling to our pride than to embrace and to extend mercy.

There is some good news in this text, however. Fortunately, the people of Ninevah are not the only ones who are pursued by God’s mercy. They are not the only ones who need to repent. God is relentlessly pursuing Jonah as well.

Fortunately, God not only has mercy on wicked unbelievers, but also on prideful, childish, tantrum-throwing, stubborn, recalcitrant disciples – even prophets.

It is interesting to me that the end of the book of Jonah is open-ended. It ends with a question, and we are not told how it all plays out, and what happens with Jonah at the end of the story.

The story ends with a question. But before we look at that question, perhaps we should ask ourselves a prior question. The question: *Who are the Assyrians in your life?*

And now to the question that God asks Jonah at the end of the story. It is the same question that is asked of the vineyard workers in the Gospel lesson. And it is the \$64,000 question for each of us here in Boise, Idaho on this beautiful Fall day in 2017. The question: *“Do you really want to be angry at God’s generosity? Do you really want to go there?”*

As we come to the Lord’s Table, open your hearts to the grace God wants to give you through these symbols of bread and wine. Let the lavish, outlandish mercy and generosity of God wash over you and flood your soul. Ponder anew God’s patience and unfailing love to you. Then rise up, and go in peace. And give away what you have received.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

