

Texts: Jonah 3:10-4:11

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Philippians 1:21-30

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Living Boldly for Christ

There's a humorous story about a driver who was a little annoyed to be stopped by a police officer. "Officer, I wasn't speeding," he says.

"No - you were going 23 miles an hour."

"Well then, why did you pull me over?"

"Back down the road, when that elderly woman pulled out right in front of you, you laid on the horn like you were really angry."

"Yes, but that's not illegal."

"And then, when that teenage boy drove by with his speakers blaring, you stuck your head out the window and yelled some things that would make your grandma blush."

"Still, that's no reason to pull me over."

"Then when the semi-truck driver stopped traffic to back into Safeway, you were banging your fists against the dashboard."

"You know that's not illegal either," he says. "Why did you stop me?"

"Well, the bumper sticker on this car says, 'God loves you and so do I,' so I figured this must be a stolen car!"

The Bible has all types of literature in it, and the story of the runaway prophet, Jonah, has a good measure of comedy, it entertains as much as it teaches. And it forces us to reflect upon the authenticity with which we live our faith. Do our actions reflect what we say we believe? Are we motivated to follow the God we say we love? Does fear of following God paralyze us as it did Jonah? Or does fear of our own destruction motivate us as it did the Ninevites? In the portion of the story we heard today, Jonah could easily be described as melodramatic. I mean if you had endured the trials of Jonah, including a near drowning, being swallowed by a whale, and camping out in the great mammal's belly for three days before getting spit out onto a beach, would the disappearance of a shady plant cause you

to become nearly suicidal? In this part of the story, Jonah comes off as a histrionic teenager or a pouting child, who stomps away to go sulk when feeling angry. And like a teenager, what caused Jonah's anger was utter humiliation. Because God didn't do what was expected. Jonah was embarrassed to proclaim words of judgement on behalf of God only to have God respond with grace. God had a change of heart because the citizens of Ninevah showed a change of heart. Their fear motivated them to fast from food and water; they covered themselves in sackcloth; and they cried out to God for mercy.

And this story contains elements of judgment and grace for Jonah as well. God's judgment against Jonah for running away from carrying God's message to Nineveh stirred up a storm inside Jonah's heart as well as a storm that threatened to destroy his escape boat, ending up with Jonah tossed overboard. While God's grace saved Jonah through the giant sea creature or whale. God's harsh threat of defeat is a judgement against Ninevah, but God's grace dissolves this threat when God sees the Ninevites repentant hearts. Jonah's anger is a judgment against God, but even when Jonah runs off to sulk, God responds with an extra measure of grace by growing a large plant to provide soothing shade for Jonah while he pouts. And when a worm destroys the plant overnight causing Jonah to wish he were dead, it is God's grace that speaks lovingly to Jonah, reminding him that even as he is so concerned about a plant which was a temporary gift he had not worked for or even asked for; it is only natural for God to care about the people of Ninevah, in whom God has fully invested, laboring to provide for them, and hoping for a relationship with them. And although God thought they were a lost cause; they have now turned toward God, so why should that not melt the heart of God? As I hear God at the end of this story, God sounds a lot like the father of the prodigal speaking to his older son, "I have always loved you; but your brother, living like a wild party animal, who was so lost to me, has returned home, so why should I not celebrate?"

But let's hold this story of Jonah in one hand while we turn our attention to the apostle Paul, as we see how the power of God's grace has transformed his heart. On Jonah's part, he says, "I would rather die than live." But Paul says, "To me, living is Christ and dying is gain, and I am hard pressed to choose between the two. If I continue to live, it will mean fruitful labor for the gospel of Jesus. If I die, I will have the joy of being with Christ." And he tells the Philippians, that although being with Christ in death will be a joy, he wants to also remain present in this life to support the followers of Christ in churches like theirs." Jonah and Paul, two missionaries with very different stories, and very different attitudes toward life, relationships, judgment and grace.

Paul enters the pages of the Bible not as a hero, but as a Pharisee, persecuting the followers of Jesus. Then his encounter with a bright light on the road to Damascus”, in which he hears the voice of Jesus asking, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” leaves him blind and sends him into the belly of darkness for three long days. And his life does a 360 and he runs toward Christ. He becomes so on fire for Christ that he devotes the rest of his life to spreading the gospel of God’s grace revealed in Christ. Both Jonah and Paul were called by God to carry a message to people in other places. Jonah ran away, but Paul was all in. Jonah is fearful. Paul is bold and courageous. Jonah is self-focused. Paul is oriented toward serving God and others. Both endure hardships and suffering, but Jonah is defeated, while Paul can even celebrate the benefits of his suffering. Jonah longs for death, because it will put an end to his misery. Paul welcomes death because it will unite him with Christ. Jonah wants to escape life. Paul is ready to invest himself fully in living, because he knows that Christ will be glorified through the expanding circle of followers. When faced with intimidating enemies, Jonah hides. Paul encourages his followers at Philippi to be bold – to stand strong when threatened by opponents. And Paul says something that I think is very important, he says by being strong when facing opponents, by working together side by side united in faith and commitment to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can show others the power of our salvation, and that witness may just be the thing that destroys them as an opponent, and I would add opens the possibility that they would become your friend.

In the West Bank of Palestine, a Christian family, the Nassar family, have maintained a witness of love and grace amidst decades of antagonism, destruction of their property, and even physical violence. Outside of their 100-acre family farm that has been in their family for over 110 years, they have a sign written in several languages: “We refuse to be enemies.” And this is how they have continued to live and farm even though Israeli settlers have encroached upon the borders of their farm, the Israeli military has ploughed a road across their property, their rights to electricity, water, and building permits have been cut off, hundreds of fruiting trees have been destroyed by vandals, and the drive between Bethlehem and their farm has often been delayed by road closures and checkpoints. For every obstacle put in their path, they persist with prayerful patience, and a desire to embody the love of Christ. Even when a few years ago, a gang of local thugs came to attack the two brothers with lethal force that landed them in the hospital, the brothers remain committed to following Jesus. To every act of aggression, this family responds with peaceful persistence. And they have opened their farm, which they now call “The Tent of Nations” to international visitors to teach them about sustainable farming and sustaining faith amidst the adversities they face every day. They rely upon international friends to help with the harvest, and the international presence provides a measure of protection against

intimidation. I know you have heard Charlie and perhaps John and Ann Collier speak about the Tent of Nations, and perhaps you have heard Daoud Nassar speak when he has visited this region before. If you want to learn more, you can visit the Tent of Nations website to see how they live boldly for Christ with a spirit of love and peace.

Yesterday, the Colliers and my husband, Charlie and I, were with a number of others listening to another Palestinian Christian, Alex Awad, who served on the faculty of Bethlehem Bible College and as pastor of a congregation in East Jerusalem, and along with his wife, Brenda, has been a United Methodist mission worker and advocate for justice for both Palestinians and Israelis. The Awads now live in Eugene, Oregon. Alex reminded us of how Palestinian Christians are Arab people who have been followers of Christ since the days of Pentecost, and yet the current pressures in the region cause Alex to wonder if the church will be able to sustain a presence in the Holy Land beyond the next 10-15 years - particularly if the present aggressive and violent Israeli policies of apartheid are not reversed, and justice and peace cannot be attained. One significant factor fueling the situation is Zionism, which has been embraced by some Christian churches, with the belief that the reconstruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem will bring the second coming of Christ. This is not biblical, and the injustice, oppression and violence that has come from this flawed ideology would certainly pain the heart of Jesus Christ, and does pain the hearts of our Christian brothers and sisters in Palestine. Alex Awad reminds us that, as Americans, we currently hold the greatest potential for influencing this situation, for putting an end to violence, for restoring human rights in the West Bank and Gaza, because our voices and our votes determine U.S. leadership and help shape U.S. policies, and our tax dollars fund U.S. priorities. We are called to find our prophetic voices to address this situation. Hope comes in the current groundswell of voices calling for an end to the senseless violence and injustice.

And we cannot ignore the fact that our faith calls us to live boldly as we use the same prophetic calling to address the many problems we have right here in our own country, and our own backyard, for we are living in a time in our nation's history where the fabric of democracy is being tested. The great American experiment is sailing on stormy seas, and unlike the boat that carried Jonah, throwing one person overboard won't solve the problem, demonizing those who hold different perspectives or support different parties won't solve the problem. So, what is God calling us to do as people of faith?

I am convinced that it is our responsibility as Christians to summon forth a collective moral conscience that values human rights in this country and supports human rights in other nations, a moral conscience that looks after the needs of those who are not privileged, calls for justice where justice is ignored. We don't need bumper stickers that read, "God

loves you and so do I.” We need people who demonstrate love, respect, and kindness in every context. Together as followers of Christ, we need to leverage our assets by using our voices, our intellect, our varied skills of leadership, and the blessing of our democratic freedoms to protect the health of our neighbors; to steward God’s creation with care; to work for justice in all its varied forms; and to actively promote unity by loving and caring for those we may not agree with while calling for moral responsibility. As people of the church, we are called to be creative to figure out how we can be a lighthouse through these stormy times, to boldly and actively proclaim the saving grace we know in Jesus Christ and the hope we have for the redemption of the world.

Let us pray:

O God, give us strength to face the challenges of these days by trusting in you to stand with us. Give us ears to hear your voice calling us, and obedience to respond. When we stray from your path, give us humility to repent. When we are tempted to abandon our consciences and surrender your vision for us, spur us onward and enable us to embrace our future with hope. Give us the vision to see what you are doing in this world, and what role you have for us to play in it. Give us courage of heart, so that we may be bold in our proclamation of your word. And guide us into the future of building your kingdom as we work for justice, compassion, and mercy. Help us grow deeper in our faith and reach wider in your love. Amen.