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Jonah 3:10 – 4:1-11
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“When Good Things Happen to Bad People”

Have you ever found yourself flipping through the channels on the TV late at night and gotten engrossed in a movie only to realize it's already been on for an hour, and you have no idea who these people are or what's going on? That's pretty much where we find ourselves in today's Scripture reading, which starts, “When God saw what they did...” What who did? When? Where? In order for this to make sense, we've got to go back. We've got to rewind to the beginning of Jonah's story and see what we've missed so far.

As you probably already know, Jonah is a prophet, who, like most prophets, receives a call from God. He's to go preach a sermon on repentance in the large, but evil city of Ninevah, because as God says, “Their wickedness has come up before me.” Jonah, however, disliking the assignment books passage on a boat going in the complete opposite direction. God, of course, follows him and sends a huge windstorm that threatens to destroy the ship. The sailors on board (as was the prevailing thought at the time) determine that somebody has angered one of the gods. After praying for deliverance and throwing cargo overboard to lighten the load, they finally approach Jonah with the 20 questions. Who are you? Where do you come from? Why is this happening? And Jonah confesses, it **is** me. “You see, I worship the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” And the sailors say, “Oh yeah, your God trumps all our gods.” They have no choice but to toss him overboard and throw him to the waves, every man and prophet for himself. But just as Jonah hits the water, God sends a large fish, perhaps a whale we think, to swallow Jonah and save him from drowning. So Jonah spends the next three days and nights in forced contemplation, a little spiritual retreat, if you will, to think and pray about what has happened.

After the three days, he is spit out onto the shore and God says, “Shall we try this again?” This time Jonah obediently goes to Ninevah and delivers the warning. In 40 days this city will be overthrown and everyone in it will die. Mission accomplished. But then the strangest thing starts to happen. From the king down to the lowliest animal, the Ninevites begin to repent of their wicked ways. They clean up the corruption and violence in the city. They cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes, they fast, and they cry out to God for forgiveness. And that's where we pick up the story this morning, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”

Seems like a great ending to the story – the prophet's preaching was a huge success, exceeding all expectations, a whole city is saved from destruction and everybody lives happily ever after, right? Unfortunately not. But what happens next is really no big surprise. It's so human, you have to either laugh or cry – Jonah gets angry. Not just angry, it says he burns with anger. He lashes out at God yelling, “It's not fair!” It's not fair... We hear that every day inside the courtroom and on the playground. We shout it at our spouse when we fight, and mutter it in the boss' office. We feel it when we watch the evening news and even when we kneel to pray. It's not fair when the punishment doesn't fit the crime. It's not fair when people don't get what they deserve. It's not fair when we're asked to forgive those who have hurt us the most. I've often thought someone should write a sequel to that famous book, *Why Do Bad Things Happen*

to Good People? It might help us understand our anger at injustice. We could call it *Why Do Good Things Happen to Bad People?*

I'm from the Midwest – from Indiana actually – a Hoosier. And if you don't know that much about Midwesterners, let me tell you one defining characteristic – we are hard workers. In the 1800s, that Puritan work ethic saddled up on the coast and made the journey west to find a welcome homestead in the heart of the country. We're up with the sun, a full day's work for a full day's pay. No sissy siestas, no afternoon tea, no mental health days for us. We keep our nose to the grindstone and take pride in our work. It was bred into my bones from birth and I'm no exception. Growing up, I lived for making good grades. I'd do all the extra credit assignments even if I had perfect test scores. It got so bad that in the 8th grade I developed a stomach ulcer because I was getting the first B in my life. Never mind that it was in stupid P.E. (phys. ed.) What kind of subject is that anyway? You see, I subscribed to the good works philosophy – work hard, do your best, be kind to others and you'll be rewarded, if not in this life at least “they'll be a star in your crown” in heaven.

And actually, on this weekend when we celebrate the founding of our great country, it's not hard to see that “can-do” spirit as one of the cornerstones of our society. America was built by people who believed in pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. The tougher the adversity, the tougher we got – whether pioneering a new frontier, surviving the Great Depression or remembering the sacrifice of so many young lives in the wars we've fought. We believe God helps those who help themselves. Through it all, we know that hard work, right living and a sense of justice will see that we get the life we deserve. “God shed his grace on thee.” It only makes sense then, doesn't it, that those who subscribe to a life of violence and hate, preying upon the weak and causing great harm in the world will be punished for their sins. And that is Jonah's point exactly.

Modern commentators have likened the ancient city of Ninevah to the societal equivalent of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany. Terror stalked the streets. Unspeakable atrocities were committed against the people of Israel and immorality and lawlessness were the rule of the land. Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing on these folks. And Jonah is furious at God for not bringing his judgment crashing down on this evil people. And yet he always knew this was a possibility. He remembered reading the Torah, which says, “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.” What Jonah had feared has happened, and he melodramatically declares, “Take my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” If the undeserving Ninevites are in on the love of God then Jonah wants no part of it.

God's done it again. God has turned everything upside down, upsetting the order of divine providence by saving Israel's worst enemies. Once again God is extremely, and dare we say, infuriatingly unpredictable. Where is the God of judgment and wrath we thought we could count on? There seems to be no meritocracy at work here. No reward and demerit system in God's kingdom. No insiders and outsiders. It's not fair! And yet, somewhere in the back of our minds we always knew this was a possibility. Remember the parable Jesus tells about the workers in the vineyard? Those lazy ones who only showed up to work the last hour and got paid the same wages as those who worked a full day. And don't forget the prodigal son who gets a huge welcome home party while the ignored elder brother has been slaving on the farm for years. And how about that adulterous woman who broke the law? Doesn't she deserve to be punished?

I'm afraid I can relate all too well to Jonah and his righteous anger. It's not fair... But God patiently asks, “Is it right for you to be angry?” To which Jonah responds by going outside

the city to sit and sulk. There God causes a bush to grow overnight and provide protection for Jonah, who is overjoyed. Then the next day, in a playful “teaching moment,” God appoints a worm to kill the bush and sends a sultry wind... Once again, Jonah’s anger gets the best of him and this time God asks the really tough question. “How can you care so much about a bush that you didn’t create and had no part in growing, and not allow me to have compassion on a whole city filled with people and animals?” It reminds us of God’s word to Moses, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” Which leads me to wonder, Were the people of Ninevah spared because of their repentance or because they were created and loved by God the Father Almighty?

In the best-selling book, *The Shack*, there is a dramatic scene in which the father of a little girl who has been killed is confronted with his desire not only to condemn the murderer but also to blame God for what did and did not happen. The otherworldly being in the room offers the father the chance to take God’s place. She pushes him, saying, “If you are able to judge God so easily, you can certainly judge the world. Here’s what you must do. First, you must choose two of your children to spend eternity in heaven, but you must also choose which two of your children will be condemned to hell.” The man responds in horror that he can’t do it. She replies, “I’m only asking you to do what you believe God does. God knows every person ever conceived, and knows them more deeply and clearly than you will ever know your own children. God loves each one according to his knowledge of the being of that son or daughter.” If you, as an earthly father, know how to love your children well, what depths do you think God will go to to save one of his own, even one who has broken God’s heart with his evil deeds?

God had compassion on the city of Ninevah and offered forgiveness without retribution. Why does it seem so easy for God and so hard for us to forgive those who trespass against us? Why do we desperately need to settle the score and exact vengeance from our enemies? Psychologists will tell us it has to do with our pain. Novelist Marlena De Blasi writes, “We accumulate the pain, collect it like cranberry glass. We display it, stack it up into a pile. Then we stack it up into a mountain so we can climb up onto it, waiting for, demanding sympathy, salvation. ‘Hey, do you see this? Do you see how big my pain is?’ We look across at other people’s piles and measure them, shouting, ‘My pain is bigger than your pain.’ It’s all somehow like the medieval penchant for tower building. Each family demonstrated its power with the height of its own personal tower. One more layer of stone, one more layer of pain, each one a measure of power.” So you and I go on inflicting more pain in the hope that it will ease our own. But where does it end? Who gets to strike the final blow? Martin Luther King Jr. believed, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

And that’s where God finds us, stumbling in the dark, clutching our pain, lashing out with anger and hate in some great need to hurt those who hurt us. And God sends the Son he loves more than anything, not to save us from the world, but to save us from ourselves. To show that God’s love can overcome all the pain and grief and anger and fear in our lives, whether we deserve it or not. And all that God asks of us is that we pass that love on. Love one another as I have loved you. Here in this, the body of Christ, that is our calling. We are to be the salt of the earth, the light to the world. And it is a huge responsibility. The world may tell us to retaliate, strike the first blow and divide ourselves into us and them, but we need to be very careful. Anne Lamott warns us, “Lest we begin to believe God hates all the people I hate.” God so loves the world, God’s people must do the same.

In the 1990s, following the end of apartheid in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu established what was called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In nearly two years of hearings and some 20,000 recorded statements, those who had suffered great pain and loss during the apartheid years were able to tell their stories and have them acknowledged by those who had inflicted the pain. The perpetrators of the violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution. One of the most moving stories to come out the hearings was from a grieving mother whose son had been killed by security forces working for the government. His body had never been found. Sitting before her, the policeman who had killed her son recounted the horrific details of the night of the murder. When he was finished, with tears in his eyes, he begged the mother for her forgiveness. She sat dry-eyed, quietly listening, and then it was her turn to speak. "I forgive you" she said. "I am a Christian and we Christians do forgive. But there are two things I would ask of you. First, I would like to know where my son is buried so that I might go and mourn at his grave. And secondly, my son is gone and now I am alone. I would ask you to come live with me and be my son."

Sometimes we don't get what we deserve. Sometimes the punishment doesn't fit the crime. Sometimes we're asked to forgive the one who has hurt us the most. It is hard. We get angry like Jonah. We might even wish like Jonah that God would take our life from us because we want no part of this. But somewhere in the back of our mind we already know the truth. "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." It may not be fair, but it is true. And that is good news for every one of us.

Amen.