

Evotional

Sermon title: ""Suffering: The final frontier? Part 4.""

Speaker: Neil Durling.

Bible passage: Jonah 4:1-11.

Date: 19.10.14.

Message:

¹ But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

- There was a fashion in generations of the past for pulpits to be a whale and the preacher would walk up the steps through its stomach and out of its mouth to speak God's Word. Jonah has done this...
- This fourth chapter corresponds closely with 1:17-2:10, but the contrast between Jonah's joy at his own rescue and anger at Nineveh's deliverance is striking. "Anger" occurs six times in this chapter after God has turned his anger away from Nineveh (3:9). It seems wrong to Jonah that God forgives! He has a childish disappointment. The wrong is in his heart, not his head. Anger is a signal that something isn't working. But it fails to tell us if the problem is outside of us or inside... We usually assume it is outside.
- Henri Nouwen once wrote: "While I was in the Abbey of the Genesee, I found that my anger & my desire to be special & to be admired bubbled up in my times of solitude. I began to see how in so many ways I had been living for my own glory rather than for the greater glory of God."

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

- Jonah sees this, verse two, as a regrettable weakness in the divine make-up. He quotes a phrase that comes from Exodus 34:6-7 when God passed in front of Moses. It was also a major theme in the preaching of one of Jonah's contemporaries. The prophet Hosea speaks of God in this way often (3:1-5, 11:1-11 & 14:1-4). There are also similar comments in Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 145:8 and Joel 2:13. This is the orthodox Hebrew view of God.
- We know this to be true, don't we???
- It is ironic: If God hadn't acted in a vengeful way towards Jonah he would now be dead in a whale's stomach.
- It seems that some mental suffering comes through a warped view of who God is and what God is like.

⁴ But the LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry (hot)?"

- The gulf between God and Jonah is huge at this stage. There is near silence and then just three words in Hebrew from God.

⁵ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

- Jonah had nothing more to say and left. He hoped God would change his mind. He hoped to view the destruction he had preached about.

⁶ Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort ("to deliver him from evil/calamity" or "to shade him from distress"), and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided (appointed) a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided (appointed) a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed (attacked) on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

- Jonah's attitude changes immediately when things are going well for him again. But he soon changes his tune again and is angry that God has destroyed the plant.

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" ("Do you do well to be angry?") "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

- I love that translation of God's question: "Do you do well to be angry?" *It is almost as if God is asking Jonah if his anger is working out well for him. Is it putting a spring in your step Jonah? Is it helping you live a healthy life?*
- God seems inconsistent to Jonah and he's had enough. He wants death again! At least he is honest with God!
- Let's be clear though: Quarrelling with God is a time-honoured Biblical practice carried out by the likes of Moses, Job, David and Peter. The sad thing is that Jonah is quarrelling because he has been surprised by grace.
- His anger is causing him suffering as it can do for us as well.

¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

- Jonah has compassion for a plant but not for the 120,000 who don't know their right from their left hand (I'd always thought this meant children but it seems the writer is referring to people unable to make moral judgements. They have been so culturally indoctrinated to act in certain ways that seem normal to them). God wonders if perhaps Jonah will care about the animals if he doesn't care about the humans...

Conclusion:

- The book of Jonah finishes like the Prodigal Son; up in the air. Both God and Jonah are angry at each other: Jonah tells God off, God calls Jonah to account. Our grace-filled God doesn't always behave the way we expect and this leaves Jonah as a small and forlorn figure. Jonah fails to see God's salvation; he is a stranger to grace.

Questions:

1. Have you ever been taught or thought that the Old Testament God is “bad” and, because of Jesus, is “good in the New Testament?”
2. Verse 2 says: *I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.* Is this your experience of God?
3. When have you felt angry with God?
4. When is it ok to be angry with God and when does it cause us suffering?
5. Has your anger ever caused you suffering?
6. Do you agree that Jonah was “a stranger to grace”?

Prayer:

Father God, Thank you that you can cope with my anger and keep coming back for me when I hide from you. Amen.