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# The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

**Jonah 3:1-10**

The Reverend Garrett Yates  
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



*The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time... saying "Get up and go to Nineveh."*

When I am in conversations with people trying to discern God's call on their life, I find them frequently worried about missing it. Well, after 3 days in the belly of a great fish, Jonah would say to you, "Don't worry about that. If God wants you to go to Nineveh, you are going to end up there."

The reason Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh is that it was Israel's great enemy. The people there were unrighteous, even "evil" we are told. They had oppressed Israel for a long time, severely. What Jonah really wanted was for God to destroy Israel's enemy. The last thing he wanted was for them to repent and be in a good relationship with the Lord. But he knew he had to follow his calling.

So he goes to Nineveh and does some preaching. We are only given one line from his sermon, and the way the text is written, it may have been the whole sermon. Notice this sermon doesn't have a lot of pastoral empathy for the people in the pews; there are no pews. Jonah is preaching in the streets. There's no helpful illustrations or narratives. There's no winsome humor; there's not even an altar call or an invitation to repent. There's just this one line of judgement.

Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown. Notice the word *overthrown* – its almost a military word. Our enemies will be overthrown. Well even after that sermon, the people of Nineveh repented, beginning with the king. Really? I've knocked myself out trying to write sermons, but I've never had near the kind of response Jonah gets with this one severe line. Forty days more, Nineveh will be overthrown. And all of Nineveh repents.

When I was at seminary, a question started to bubble up in one of my classes on church and evangelism about why it is that judgmental churches seem to grow. My seminary got interested enough in this question, and so they did what most academic communities do in such a scenario: they formed a panel discussion. There was a historian on the panel who described how in the history of our country there have been episodic periods of revival and renewal that break out whenever society is not working well with people, and that we may be in one of those moments now. There was a theologian on the panel who helpfully pointed out that evangelicals are not the only people who use judgment. And that progressives are also quick to judge, its just a different target: they are judging social systems. But that we are all involved in judgmental preaching. There was a biblical scholar who walked through some

passages. The person I found most interesting on the panel was a psychologist, who said that people are drawn to the words of judgmental preachers because they think that the warnings of calamity are addressed not to themselves but to someone they don't like. And they'd just as well have God send a little judgement down on that person, and then there will finally be justice. I was fascinated by all of this.

But listening, I didn't feel they were getting to the heart of it. And later, after having a few years in parish ministry under my belt, I think I have my own theory. My theory is: people are drawn to judgmental preaching because it's what they know best. Judgment is what we know best. Judgment is what we've known our whole lives. We were judged by our parents when we were children, and then by our children when we became parents. We're judged by teachers, coaches, supervisors, friends, our family, and we are judged most severely of all by the person who keeps showing up in the mirror: we know what we've done and left undone. So yes, we'll join all the other people on the streets of Nineveh, and we'll say, "Amen Jonah, you preach it. It sounds right to me." It's sad but true.

I was asked not long ago by someone why I don't do more preaching on judgment in my sermons, this actually from someone more progressive. What these people are looking for is what I think to be called The Bad Dog sermon, where the preacher stands in the pulpit and shakes his or her finger, and essentially says, "You bad dogs, look what you've done. Don't do that in here. Take that outside." The amazing and psychologically very curious thing to me is how much people like the Bad Dog sermon. My hunch is that people like it because just about everywhere else in the world it seems we are motivated by inadequacy and guilt, and we come to expect the preacher to use the familiar language already rattling around in our heads. I don't give the Bad Dog sermon because I don't think anyone needs to be convinced they are a bad dog. We're not confused about that. What we're confused about is what can be done.

What we are completely confused about is this notion of the grace of God. And the better you are doing at life, and the clearer you are about your rights, the more confusing grace becomes.

Well, later in the text we are told that when God saw that the people had repented and turned to God, God turned to them. In fact the text actually says that God changed his mind about the calamity he would bring upon them. Really? Can God's mind be changed? That has frightening implications if we take it out of context. My recommendation: don't take it out of context.

Here it is simply making the case that God can be moved, and nothing moves God like a people appealing to grace.

But Jonah wanted nothing to do with this. He wasn't having it. And in his anger he said to the Lord, "This is what I was worried about. This is why I fled to Tarshish in the beginning. Because I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Ready to relent from punishing." And then in a moment of adolescent rage he says, "If this is the way you are going to treat me, just go ahead and kill me and get it over with." At this point I've always imagined God in heaven rolling his holy eyes, "Really, Jonah? Kill you?"

Maybe there is something more going on than all that. Maybe when revival broke out in Nineveh, something cherished in Jonah died. Like all of us, his life had been built around core convictions. And Jonah's core convictions included that God rewards the righteous and punishes the unrighteous and the evil, and that God loves Israel best. And none of those convictions could stand up under the weightiness of God's grace. Something in him died.

And maybe that's the point of the call to Jonah. Maybe it wasn't just the Ninevites who needed to be converted. Wherever it is that God calls you to go, wherever it is God calls you to serve, to help, to clothe, to teach, to love – be it in a prison or in a soup kitchen or a refugee family – be clear that the calling is for your conversion as well. It is you whom God is saving.

The old prophet, who was so certain he was right, so careful to follow the rules, so worried about the injustice of God's grace – that's what had to die. And maybe it has to die in all of us.

You know this year is our 150th Anniversary as a church. Like the old prophet, we are getting up there in years. At the vestry meeting this past Wednesday, we spent a lot of time talking about plans for the 150th, including a big dinner at the end of April and maintaining a strong relationship with our refugee family. At the end of the meeting, I asked, "How would you like to pray for the parish for this upcoming year?" And it was Heather who almost didn't miss a beat: "Grace. That everyone who comes in our doors might experience grace."

Why – the book of Jonah puts the question to us quite simply - why would you want to spend your life struggling to be good enough and to be right, when you could live it beholding the wild grace of God?

I do pray you feel it here. Experience it here. This year. Every year.