

## **Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?**

Jonah 4:1-11

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11–20

Luke 23:33–43

### **Text: Jonah 4:11**

And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

### **Introduction**

This past October 4<sup>th</sup> a man was working on his computer at his Toronto home at around 2:45 a.m. when he suddenly saw the lights of his 2022 Jeep flash through his window. He ran outside to see what was happening; he became the victim of a carjacking at gunpoint. While he was physically unharmed such an experience traumatizes and leaves emotional scars. Additionally, being victimized by thieves intrudes into your life adding the work of trying to recover; for this man, dealing with police reports, insurance and trying to replace his vehicle, all of which takes cycles of time typically dedicated to other things. It is to be robbed twice, first of his vehicle, then of the time it takes to recover to some sense of normal. (Just for starters.)

I recall the painfulness that my daughter and son-in-law experienced when their home was broken into while away on vacation. I know the heart cry of loved ones whose invested life-savings were lost when the principle of an investment company absconded with the funds. And, no doubt, you too could recount such stories; some might even be of personal experience.

In the King James version of the Bible, Matthew’s gospel calls the two criminals crucified with Jesus ‘thieves.’ (Matthew 27:38) The moniker ‘thief on the cross’ is commonly used of them because of the predominance of the King James bible not many years ago. Today we read from Luke’s gospel of the conversation between one of these thieves and Jesus. “Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” So, permit me a question. Was Jesus too easy on this guy? A one sentence deathbed confession about Jesus being a king and he joins Jesus in Paradise. What if he were the guy who carjacked you at gunpoint or absconded with your life’s savings? The mercy of God may look as though the judgement of

God—you shall not steal—is completely ignored along with your victimization. If you know this feeling you have some idea of the nature of Jonah's reaction to Nineveh being spared.

1. "But this (God sparing Nineveh) was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." In Hebrew the grammar of the sentence stresses the intensity of Jonah's feeling. "It was displeasing to Jonah, very displeasing." Keep in mind that the author of Jonah writes this story, years later, to people who all know that the Assyrians destroyed the northern ten tribes of Israel. Assyria has become a word associated with cruelty and atrocities. 'If there is any real justice then surely no forgiveness should ever be accorded to them,' many think. For Jonah, and many of the first hearers of this story, God's clemency with respect to Nineveh is a flaw in God's character. To put ourselves in the story, should God be merciful to Adolf Hitler?

For hearers of this story, we now learn for the first time why Jonah took a boat to Tarshish to flee from his commission to go to Nineveh. And keep in mind this is a prayer. Jonah is angry with God. "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; 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." Jonah's prayer begins with a strong interjection, "Alas, Lord!" It is the same interjection with which the mariners on the ship pray before tossing Jonah overboard. "They cried out to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life.'" For the mariners, tossing Jonah was a crisis; for Jonah, Nineveh's salvation is the disaster.

Jonah knows the story well when God commanded Moses to make new tablets of stone on which to write the law; "The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The Lord.' The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.'" (Exodus 34:5-6) Jonah also knows that Israel was chosen to be God's people in the world not because there was anything praiseworthy about them—God knew them to be a stiff-necked people—rather it was out of God's great mercy.

Jonah says he would rather die than live in a world governed by a God who would show mercy to the Ninevites no matter how repentant they were. It is easy to be hard on Jonah. Perhaps we should ask ourselves how we feel about people who have committed crimes and while in prison make a profession of faith and from all appearances are changed. We wonder if the repentance is genuine. And even if it

is, does this mean the crime was any less a crime? God's mercy can seem a scandalous thing to us.

I bring you back for a moment to the thief on the cross next to Jesus. Did God have to be more merciful to save him than God did in order to save me? Did Christ suffer on the cross a little less in order to redeem me compared to that thief? The gospel makes clear that we don't know the wretchedness of our sin, the utter sinfulness of sin, nor what it means to God. Jesus' death was in equal measure for that thief and for me. As we read from the Apostle Paul today, through Christ "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." Each human is alienated from God because of sin. For those who have been believers for some time endeavouring to follow Jesus there can be this tendency to see ourselves as a little cut spiritually above those we deem unsaved. Jonah has lost sight of the magnitude of the mercy of God that rescued him.

God responds to Jonah's prayer with a penetrating question. "Is it right for you to be angry?" In Hebrew the emphasis of the question falls on the intensity of Jonah's anger. "Is your anger that intense?" Jonah has just said it was better to die than live; he is that angry about God's clemency. One thing that leaps out at us is the capacity of our wounds to deflect us from our vocation. Jonah thinks of the cruelty of the Assyrians to his people Israel, and it blinds him to the work God assigned him. Did the Assyrians commit atrocities against Israel? Yes. Is Jonah right to be angry at such things? Yes. Are you not angry at people who take advantage of children to satisfy some sexual craving?

Bitterness has set in for Jonah. In our small group study pastor Eric Mason defined bitterness and the fermenting of unforgiveness and anger. You have likely heard the saying that 'bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other guy to die.' The wounds you and I sustain have an enormous capacity to render us vindictive. I also know that a person who has been victimized and is in pain often inflicts pain on others.

The primary damage we sustain when we are wounded is the wound itself. The secondary damage is the poisoning of our own heart and mind. The tertiary damage is the damage our poisoned spirit then inflicts on other people. The story of Jonah should find us searching our heart, soberly and seriously, lest the wounds we've accumulated render us both dangerous to others and useless to God.

2. “Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.” Jonah is waiting, hoping that judgement will come upon Nineveh; that God will decide to bring the calamity he planned but relented from. God has already decided to relent; Jonah’s waiting to see what will happen is a thinly veiled request that God rescind his mercy. It is like a child who is informed that no, his parent will not drive him to school that day, but he goes out and sits in the car in a thinly veiled demand to be driven to school.

Why does the author of the book make a note that Jonah was east of the city?

The author often evokes images and themes from the Genesis story. In Genesis, eastward movement often symbolizes humanity’s departure from God’s will. For example, Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden leaves the banished couple east of their former home. Cain’s departure from God’s presence ends in his settling east of Eden. The builders of Babel are in the process of travelling east when they decide to stop and build a monument to their name. When Lot separated from Abraham and settled near Sodom and Gomorrah the text notes that he traveled east. Eastward migration in Genesis marks stages on humanity’s drift from God. Jonah’s position east of the city seems to signal the prophet’s return to his previous rebellion.

Jonah then builds a lean-to for shade. The word used here for shade is used biblically of God’s care of the believer’s life; ‘you who dwell in the shelter of the most High,’ exudes the Psalmist. (Psalm 91:1) Ironically, in this context the term refers to shade of Jonah’s own making. In the concluding section of the story God addresses the corruption in Jonah’s heart. It seems to me we humans are ever erecting shade of our own making in order to deal with the corruption of our own hearts. We often do that by comparison as in “I’m not like those really bad people who deserve judgement.”

I love the shade of a maple tree on a hot day. Perhaps you know that trees require hundreds of gallons of water per day. It is estimated that a maple tree fifty feet high with 177,000 leaves (area 1/6 acre) releases 58 gallons of water per hour into the air on a hot summer afternoon. This is why the shade of that tree feels so cool. It wasn’t a maple tree, but you could understand why Jonah was so happy about the bush God provided that offered him shade from the desert sun. You can also understand Jonah’s unhappiness because a worm attacked the bush and caused it to wither. In the course of the life span of this bush Jonah experienced the blessing of God as it grew and provided shade and the judgement of God as it withered and

left Jonah exposed to the discomfort of a sultry east wind and blazing sun such that Jonah wants to die.

Then God asks Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” As we review the rest of what God said this rhetorical question implies an affirmative answer. Yes, Jonah was right to be angry about the worm that decimated the tree. So, God says, “You are concerned about the bush, good, ... And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Many interpret the phrase those ‘who do not know their right hand from their left’ as a reference to children. There is another way to read this text. This phrase is used frequently with reference to proper Torah observance in Israel. God often warns Israel not to turn to the right or to the left as they walk the path of obedience. (Deuteronomy 5:32; 17:11) These warnings indicate that this phrase is associated with Israel’s access to special revelation; they have the Law of God others do not. God is concerned about and working among the nations of the world even though he has a particular relationship with Israel.

In the particularity of the church’s proclamation of Jesus Christ it is often asked what about those who have never heard the gospel or ever seen a bible. Through the Psalmist we learn that. “The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. ... Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.” (Psalm 33:13, 18) The Apostle Peter said, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35) Jesus said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” (John 10:16)

What we learn from Jonah is that God is at work in every nation calling people to himself. God can use any means at all to do so; the storm the mariners saw and the five word sermon of a reluctant prophet that Nineveh heard. When the church proclaims Jesus as the sole saviour of the world, we are not saying that he is not a work in places were that proclamation has not been heard. And the reason we know God is at work everywhere is because of the his particular revelation in Jesus Christ. The gospel witnesses that God can use any means at all to make incursion into our lives; and you know that you have met God for sure in Jesus Christ.

You notice that the question God asks Jonah—should I not be concerned about Nineveh—goes unanswered. It is an open ended question that God puts to all of us through the story of this prophet Jonah. In the cross of Jesus Christ we learn that when God's love meets our sin, the result is mercy. God cannot not love. The reason God can be merciful is because he bore his own judgement of our sin in himself. The mercy of God is far broader and richer than we can imagine. May we live joyful lives as witnesses of His great mercy.