

*A Well Timed Plant*

By Kate Satterstrom

August 22, 2021  
First Presbyterian Church  
McMinnville, Oregon

**Jonah 3:10-4:11**

*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.*

*But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 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.*

*The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."*

*But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"*

One of my dearest friends, Carey, will occasionally post a picture on social media with a caption that begins “if you were at my kitchen table...”. In these posts, she shares some of the things that are on her heart; things that have been taking up time in her thoughts; things she would share with you if you were sitting at her kitchen table. I love when she does these posts partially because she lives in Texas and I wish I *could* be sitting at her kitchen table, but also because candid times of sharing like this really resonate with me. There is nothing I love more, both in my work life and my personal life, than sitting down with people one on one and hearing what is on their heart. So, if you would indulge me, I would love to invite you to my proverbial kitchen table to share some of my reflections on Jonah 4.

This week marks our third and final week of journeying with Jonah. From running away to the belly of a fish to the streets of Nineveh, Jonah has been on quite the journey. And in the chapter prior to where we picked up today, we learn of the miraculous repentance of the Ninevites and the incredible redemptive mercy of God. So, we should all be happy right?! This is where the credits roll at the end of the movie with everything working out just right? Right? Nope! We begin our passage today learning that Jonah is miffed. He is angry and irritated and frustrated and storms out of the city to pout. And while Jonah might seem like he’s being eccentrically dramatic...

*If you were sitting at my kitchen table...*

I’d confess that recently I’ve struggled with extending grace to others also. I am frustrated that we are over a year and a half into the pandemic and are still having to wear masks and calculate the risk of each social interaction we take. I am angry that hospitals are filling up again and that we are debating the effectiveness of a third round of vaccines when much of the world hasn’t had the opportunity to access the vaccine at all.

In one of the commentaries I read, it mentioned that the Ninevites weren’t just the eccentric neighbors you don’t see eye to eye with. To Jonah the Ninevites were the equivalent to our modern-day villains like Hitler, Charles Manson, or Osama bin Laden. Those people who you just can’t imagine the grace of God

being extended too, those people whose crimes are unfathomable and unforgiveable.

*If you were sitting at my kitchen table...*

I'd admit that I'm not always great about following world events, but that I have been glued to the news about Afghanistan the last few weeks. I cannot understand a faith that causes people to rise up in arms against their neighbors and rule with brutality and destruction. I ache thinking about families hiding in fear of what will happen to them. My heartbreaks particularly for women and girls who have lost hope for the ability to work or receive an education or drive a car or marry who they want or walk down the street without being escorted by a male relative.

God sends Jonah a well-timed plant to shade him from the brutal Middle Eastern sun. Jonah cherishes this plant and takes advantage of the reprieve that it offered. And then God had a worm eat away at the plant, killing it. And Jonah is devastated, his anger at God growing even more. Jonah is so mad at the whole situation that he said he would rather die; dying would be better than having to deal with the unjust mercy offered to the Ninevites and the unjust destruction of his plant.

*If you were sitting at my kitchen table...*

I would confess that I too often seek God's attention like it's a zero-sum transaction. I view God's mercy through the lens of scarcity, believing that the more compassion shown to others, the less tolerance God will have for me. I am quick to tout my qualifications and earnings while pointing out the unflattering qualities of others. I am quicker to place blame than I am to be humble. I am quicker to point out other faults than to acknowledge my privilege. I wrestle with God, questioning other's successes and pleading "why not me?".

God, the ever-present teacher, shows Jonah the error of his thinking. Did you deserve the plant? Did you earn the plant? Did it come into being because of you? NO. God gave Jonah the plant, because in God's gracious provision, God provided the plant to help Jonah in his need. Did the Ninevites earn God's forgiveness? Did the Ninevites deserve God's grace? Did the Ninevites believe God's compassion into being? NO. God gave the Ninevites reprieve, because in God's gracious provision, God provided grace to help the Ninevites in their need.

Did Jonah secure safe passage out of the fish? Did Jonah earn his way back onto dry land? Did Jonah bank enough gold stars to buy his way out of the fish? NO. God delivered Jonah safely from the fish, because in God's gracious provision, God provided grace to help Jonah in his need.

*If you were sitting at my kitchen table...*

I would candidly share that I too often confuse the mercy of God for something I've earned. As a rule follower, I often view grace as transactional. Seeing my following of the rules and being a good person as a means of earning God's favor. But the very nature of grace is that it is based in God's compassion. Just as I am quick to agree that the Ninevites didn't deserve God's grace, I too must admit that I fall short of being deserving of God's grace. Despite my best efforts and despite others favorable views me as worthy, I am still in need of heaps of mercy unearned and undeserved.

And just as God see the Ninevites floundering. And just as God sees the Ninevites floundering. God too see us and offers us a promise:

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he offers us this promise "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

*If you were sitting at my kitchen table...*

I would remind you that one of the biggest gifts the story of Jonah offers us, is that there is nothing that we can do that can separate us from God's love. Our God is big enough to hold your pain. Our God is compassionate enough to hold your hurt. Our God is understanding enough to hold your indifference. Our God is strong enough to hold your anger. Our God is powerful enough to hold your trauma. Our God is tough enough to hold our confusion. Our God is gentle enough to hold your quiet, unsure moments. Our God is empathetic enough to weather the storm with you. Our God is compassionate enough to show up in every moment, in every season, in every circumstance. Our God is present. Jonah teaches us that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.