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First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Jonah 3:10 – 4:11

Title: “Compassion for the Great City”

(Concluding the series: Feeling for the City What God Feels for the City)

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Why is Jonah so angry? So angry he wants to die? He has just been used to ignite one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in human history. He is a prophet. Prophets preach. They live to preach, to speak the living Word of the Living God; the Word that makes things happen. Jonah gets to preach. To one of the great cities of the world of his day. Jonah gets to preach to the city of Nineveh, the leading city of the Assyrian Empire. And when he does, the whole city responds! Big time! The whole city repents, changes their thinking at fundamental levels, turns from their inherently misery-making choices, and calls on the Living God. I mean, what’s not to like about that?

Yet, there he is, sitting on the desert sand just outside the city limits. Watching to see if what he had hoped would happen happens. He sits there angry. So angry he wants to die. That he would sit in the sand so exhausted that he feels like he is dying, I can understand! I know that feeling very well. Sunday afternoon, so depleted I wonder if I can ever do it again. So tired it feels like I am dying. But angry? After witnessing the life-changing power of the preached God’s Word? Angry? So angry he wants to die? Why?

Because the God he thinks he knows is not being the God he thinks God should be. God is not being God the way Jonah wants God to be. God. Know anyone like that? He is not simply confused about God and God’s way in the world. Nor is he simply disappointed with God and God’s way in the world. All of us have experienced such confusion and disappointment in one way or another, have we not? Jonah does not like the God he is encountering. Jonah does not like what God feels for the city. And Jonah does not want to feel what God feels for the city. God’s feelings for the city make Jonah angry. To put it in terms of the text of Jonah, especially chapter 4, verses 10-11, God’s compassion for the city makes Jonah angry. So angry he wants to die.

Something is very wrong with this picture. A whole city turns from the sinful ways that have gotten it in trouble. 120,000 people have decided to renounce the ways of deceit, corruption, injustice, immorality, violence. And they experience mercy and grace. Rivers of mercy and grace. The very thing the God of Jonah promises to do for all who repent. The very thing Jonah knows to be at the heart of the God of Israel. The very thing Jonah confesses to God! “You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity: (4:2). Jonah sees the heart of the heart of God displayed before his very eyes. A miracle of mercy and grace takes place! An entire city changes its mind about how to live, and thereby experiences a new lease on life. Jonah ought to have run back to Jerusalem to share the good news! “Hear ye! Hear ye! Nineveh heard Yahweh’s word and repented. People are

changing. They are becoming human again! Let us celebrate the God Who so loves the world!”

But no. Jonah is angry. So angry he wants to die. Jonah 4:1 – “But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry” (NASB). Or as the version we read this morning renders it, “But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry” (TNIV). Literally it is: “It became evil to Jonah as a great evil.” Or, “It became wrong to Jonah as a great wrong.” Why? Why does what God did seem evil, wrong? Again, because the God Jonah thinks he knows is not being God the way Jonah thinks God is suppose to be God.

And in the back and forth interaction between the true and living God and his reluctant prophet, we see the true and living God seeking to bring Jonah into a true and living understanding of the true and living God.

I like how Bible teacher Ron Cline outlines the book of Jonah: chapter 1 – running from God; chapter 2 – running into God; chapter 3 – running with God; chapter 4 – trying to run God! And just as in chapter 1 Jonah discovered what he already knew, that he could not run from God, so in chapter 4 Jonah discovers what he already knew, that he cannot run God. Jonah cannot make God be God the way Jonah wants God to be God.

Now, you likely noticed as we read Jonah 4 that God asks Jonah a question – twice. The same question twice. “Do you have good reason to be angry?” (4:4). “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” Jonah answers God the 2<sup>nd</sup> time...about the plant. “Yes, I do have good reason to be angry.” But he does not answer God the 1<sup>st</sup> time...about God giving Nineveh mercy and grace. He just sits there ...in the desert sand...looking at the city in silence. He gives the Lord of the universe ‘the silent treatment’! But silent though he may be, knowing Jonah as I think I know him, Jonah had to be answering God in his soul, right? “Do you have good reason to be angry?” Although he does not answer outloud, I think he does think he has ‘good reason’. So let me suggest some ‘good reasons’ to be angry. Let me suggest that Jonah could have said.

1. Jonah could have said, “You have wasted my time and energy.” I go to the city, to the city You know wants to destroy me and my people, and tell it that You are about to overthrow it, and You do not do it! I travel all that way, I risk being stoned to death, and then... nothing. So, yes, I have good reason to be angry.

But that reason is not grounds for being angry for the simple reason that God had not sent him to announce destruction. God had sent him with a word of warning. A word of warning is a word of grace. Because the word of warning means God is not finished with us. A word of warning means there is the possibility for things to change.

2. Another reason for being angry, Jonah could say: “You made me look like a fool,” Jonah could say. I stuck my neck out, I put my own reputation on the line, to speak Your word of judgment. And then, nothing – You do not follow through. It looks like those who declare the world will end on such and such a date like December 21, 2012 ... and it

does not happen. I look like a fool.” But again God had not declared that Nineveh was going to end. Yes, God was warning that if it did not turn from its ways, ways that inherently lead to trouble, it would collapse. As it did a few generations later, in 606 BC, when that new generation did not repent. But God did not say the city was going to implode in Jonah’ day. Jonah misunderstood God’s Word. The people of Nineveh, however, did not. And they looked to Jonah as a hero. Where preaching brought them into mercy and grace. Nineveh no longer exists. It is now just a big mound of dirt, on the opposite side of the Tigris River from Mosul, Iraq. And interestingly the mound is called Nabi Yunus, prophet Jonah!

3. Moving further into the heart of Jonah’s angry, He could say, “What bothers me more is that You made a fool of Yourself!” You did not do what You said You were going to do. You are now going to have a reputation for being inconsistent. You are going to be known as a wishy-washy God, a God Whose Word cannot be trusted.” Jonah the prophet is angry because God seemed to have shamed His name, to have tarnished His own glory! Prophets live for the glory of God. It is one of the great goals of preaching – to glorify God, to make his name glorious. Jonah is angry because God does not seem to have not honor His own glory.

But again, God had not said He was going to destroy Nineveh at that time. But even if God had said He would do it and changed His mind, God does not lose. The fact is, God is willing to tarnish His honor to save sinners. He told Israel that again and again. After all, had not Israel again and again put God in a place where He had to tarnish His reputation to remain their God?

Which is what Jesus teaches us in His famous parable of the prodigal son, or prodigal sons, or better yet, prodigal father. The father, in Jesus’ parable, the father goes against all cultural expectations about how a father ought to treat his sinful sons, and risks his reputation to bring his sons into his heart. Besides, Jesus teaches us that the reputation His Father wants to have in the world is, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Which is what He does with us today – at the Table.

4. Go deeper into Jonah’s anger. He could say, “You are not being fair,” All my life I have tried to live in a way that pleases You. I have studied Torah, Your Law. I have done my best to obey. I have sought to be holy. And then You let the sinful city off scot-free ... just because they repented. You gave them a new lease on life without making them shape up first. You are not playing fair.” Interestingly, in churches that follow a fixed calendar of liturgical readings for each Sunday of the Christian year, the text paired with Jonah 4 is Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus’ parable of the laborers. A landowner hires a set of works at sunrise for a certain fee. A few hours later another he hires another set for the same fee - working less hours! Around noon another group is hired for the same fee – working even less hours! Near the end of working day yet another group is hired, again for the same fee – hardly working at all! Those hired early in the day are angry – “this is not fair.” To which the man who hired them says, “I did you no wrong ... and besides, can I not do with what is mine what I wish? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?” (20:15).

5. Dig deeper into Jonah's anger "What makes me so mad," he could say, 'is that it is not any old city You are giving mercy and grace. You are being generous to my enemies, to Your people's enemies."

It is a fact of history: no empire treated Israel the way Assyria did. No empire was a cruel and evil toward Israel. "God, You are not just sparing any old empire. You are sparing an evil empire bent on destroying Your people." The issue being not only the desire for revenge, but the whole matter of security. "Listen Lord, if You treat our enemies this way ... with mercy and grace ... what kind of security do we have in the world? If we cannot count on You to wipe out our enemies how can we feel secure in this world?"

But what is the message of all the other Hebrew prophets? "Yahweh is our security!" The destruction of the enemy is not what makes us secure. Yahweh the great I AM makes us secure.

6. Dig deeper into Jonah's angry. "You are unraveling the moral fabric of the universe," he could have said. I think this is the heart of the matter for Jonah. God's way with Nineveh makes Jonah feel the universe no longer make sense. There is no doubt about it – Nineveh was a wicked city. If God is a God of justice, how can He just let Nineveh off without being brought to justice? What kind of universe are we living in if evil is not punished? Jonah is angry because it appears that God does not care about evil.

J. Barrie Shepherd puts it this way:

Jonah could not handle a world in which it seems  
that God does not care "... when the poor are trampled down,  
when widows and orphans are exploited,  
when the murder of children and rape of women  
is an everyday event upon our city streets,  
when nations and races are subject to slavery and genocide,  
when God's own children heap bombs upon bomb  
that are capable of extinguishing life from the planet  
in one flash" (*Encounters*, 141).

What kind of universe is this where the Creator does not punish evil? When God relented, and did not destroy evil Nineveh as Jonah expected, it seemed that the moral fabric of the universe unraveled. And he was angry. So angry he wants to die. He no longer wants to live in a universe where God is not being God in the way Jonah thinks God should be God. But as we have seen through the whole Jonah story, God does not give up. Yahweh goes to work to bring His prophet into deeper understanding, and, thereby, into deeper relationship. The true and living God wants Jonah to know Him as He is, not as Jonah wants Him to be. Notice what God does not do. God does not do what I would have been tempted to do. God does not say to Jonah: "You disobeyed Me, did you not? You turned

your back on Me and My will, did you not? What makes you think you are any different than the Assyrians? What did I do with your disobedience, with your sin? Did I destroy you? I could have left you to drown in the sea. In fact, that would have been the just thing to do. What did I do about you? I pursued you. Oh, Jonah, where would you be today if I treated you the way you want to treat Nineveh?" But God did not take that tact with the angry prophet. It probably would have made him all the more angry. And Jonah would have said something stupid like, "go ahead – treat me as I deserve."

Instead God took another tact. God "appointed ..." God "appointed a plant". Where have we heard that verb before? When Jonah tried to run from Yahweh. God "appointed" a great fish to go after the prophet, to rescue him from certain death in the sea. We are going to hear the verb two more times. God appointed a plant to grow and make shade for the prophet sitting on the desert sand. Likely a castor oil plant. They can spring up in just few days. Reaching eight to ten feet in height. They have very large leaves making for a lot of good shade. The plant changes Jonah's mood, from very angry to very happy – "greatly happy" as the text puts it (4:6). What a picture of the love of God! Surely God had other, bigger things to do that day. Yet God pays attention to this one man, seeking to bring him into His heart.

The plant, says the text, relieved Jonah of his "troubles." Where have we heard that word before? In God's initial call, "arise, go to Nineveh ... for its troubles have come up to Me." (1:1). The plant relieves the angry prophet of his troubles. But then God again "appoints" (4:7). A worm. A worm that attacks the plant that makes Jonah so happy. The plant withers and dies. What is going on? As one commentator says, Jonah "is given a taste of what destruction is like." (JD Smart). And God "appoints" one more time.

An east wind (4:8). With scorching heat and dust. And the wind blew and the sun beat down on Jonah's body. And he begs to die. The death of the plant is too much. He is so faint he begs to die. "Death is better to me than life", he says (4:2). Then God asks him, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" (4:9) and this time Jonah does answer out loud. "Yes, I have good reason to be angry even to death" (4:9). It is the last word we hear from the prophet. In the story anyway. For hopefully he moved on. But the story ends without us knowing. Probably because the story is asking us if we will move on and learn to let God be God the way God wants to be God. Then comes the climax of the story. God has Jonah focus on the emotions, on Jonah's own emotions. "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight." Although he does not say anything, Jonah certainly agrees – "yes, I did have compassion on the plant".

Then God asks, "And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hands, as well as many animals?" (4:11). Do you hear God? He is asking angry Jonah, "Do I not have the right to feel what you feel? Do I not have the right to the same emotions you have? Can I not feel for people what you feel for plants?"

“They do not know the difference between their right and left hand,” says God. Can you hear compassion in God’s words? They do not have the ability to discern right from wrong. They have lost the capacity for sound moral reasoning. And they are not able to get themselves out trouble. People in trouble pull at the heart-strings the true and living God. Especially when people cannot get themselves out of the trouble! Not that the people of Nineveh are “innocent sufferers.” They are not. They had made, as we have made, sinful choices that are inherently trouble-making. What pulls at God’s heart is that the people are “trapped” (Stuart, 507). Unable to free themselves. The down & outers – helpless and trapped, unable to free themselves. The up & outers – helpless and trapped, unable to free themselves. More deeply trapped because they still hold on to the illusion that they can free themselves!

Again, God is not saying to Jonah that the people of Nineveh are innocent. And God is not excusing their sin. God is angry with their sin. Just read the prophet Nahum! God abhors the sins of the city. Make no mistake about that Jonah. But God cannot bear the loss of sinners. God hates the sins of the city, Jonah. But God cannot bring Himself to blot out the sinners of the city. Blessed be His name! “Should I not have compassion on the great city?” And there the story ends. Unresolved. We are left with things unresolved. But only for awhile. Let me suggest how things get resolved. Knowing Jonah as I think I now do, I think he would have objected. He would have rightly objected. “But Lord, surely the repentance of Nineveh does not even the score. How can their repentance, their turning from their sin in sorrow ever make up for the terrible atrocities?” Knowing God as He has revealed Himself to be in other prophets, God responds: “It cannot. Their repentance cannot even the score. Nothing they can do can ever make up for their evil deeds.” Knowing God as He has revealed Himself to be, I think God would say to Jonah: “Your wrestling with Me is taking place within the larger story. In My extending mercy and grace to Ninevah, I am not ignoring justice. You are going to have to trust Me as I keep moving the larger story forward.”. and stand in Nineveh’s place. And what we discover as the larger story unfolds is that god had planned to execute justice at another time in another way. As it is said in most synagogues: “the goal of all prophesies is the days of the Messiah” [F. Delitzsch, 121] God planned for Someone to come and stand in Ninevah’s place. And Go planned to execute Ninevah’s deserved punishment by executing the punishment against Someone. And, amazingly, God planned to become that Someone!

Jonah could not see – how could he? – where God’s compassion for trapped people, where God’s feelings for us sinners would take Him. It would take God to the cross! God becomes one of us. God becomes us. God becomes us in our sin. As Jesus, the only truly innocent one, who knew no sin, the Holy One choose to become sin. And then, on that cross, God takes on all the justice, all the punishment, Nineveh’s sin rightly demands. See how the apostle Paul puts it. Romans 3:23-26. Words jam-packed with good news for every city. “... for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, being made right with God as a gift of His grace through the rescue which is in Christ Jesus; Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”

And why does God do this? “This was to demonstrate His justice, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His justice at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the who is of the faith of Jesus.”

Little did Jonah know – how could he? –that when God “relented” in the face of the city’s repentance, God was not changing His mind. The French sociologist Jacques Ellul puts it so well in his brilliant work on Jonah. He is wrestling with God “relenting,” or, “repenting,” as it is sometimes rendered. “God suffers the very suffering which in His justice He should have laid on us. God causes the judgment to fall on Himself; this is the meaning of his repenting. We shall see that it is in Jesus Christ that this is done plainly and for us. Jesus Christ is precisely the one upon whom falls all the judgment and all the suffering decided for each of us, the judgment and the suffering of the world. In reality God’s repenting in the face of man’s repentance is Jesus Christ. Each time there is any question of this repenting in Scripture we thus have a new prophecy of Jesus Christ who puts into effect both the justice of God and also the love of God without doing damage to either the one or the other.”

Then this: “God’s purpose has not changed. From the very beginning his aim is to save the world from his own wrath.” (100). Yes, Jonah, I did forgive your enemies. Yes, I did have compassion on them when they repented. But Jonah, I did not violate My justice. I executed My justice against Nineveh ... and against you ...against Myself. In 33 AD, on a Roman cross. Jonah, the universe in on sure footing. I Myself have taken the punishment Nineveh’s sin and your sin deserve. I can, therefore, without any reservation, have compassion on you and on the city.

