

Title: *An Ungodly Anger*

Text: Jonah 4

What kind of God do you think God is? What is your image of God? The author Anne Lamott has said, “You can be sure you have made God over into your own image when he hates the same people you do.”

Two weeks ago we looked at chapter 2 and there’s a wonderful verse in Jonah’s prayer where he says, “Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”

You would think that in that confession, Jonah had learned an important lesson. He got the second chance to go back to Nineveh. He dutifully went to Nineveh and we might want to underscore that word, dutifully.

When he finally turned around and set his course for Nineveh, it was as much because he didn’t want to go back into the belly of a fish as it was out of any great concern for the people of Nineveh.

The Ninevites were a fierce, ruthless people. They were a menace to their neighbors and they did some unbelievably cruel things. There are governments today that we look at with great hostility – North Korea, Iran. Is our beef really with the North Korean people or with the Iranian people? At the height of Soviet power and influence, our beef wasn’t with the Soviet people. It was with their government and the evil, oppressive system they forced their people to live under.

I hear reports from Iran of an underground church and I want to pray for those believers and their witness to be strengthened.

If the revival that has swept across South Korea, making that basically a Christian country would continue to sweep on up the Korean peninsula and form such a strong movement that the government would eventually be either reformed or overturned, that would be a cause for great rejoicing. If Kim Jong Il had Jesus in his heart, he wouldn’t be trying to figure out how to throw nuclear missiles at his neighbors and his enemies.

Rick Warren received an invitation to go to North Korea a few years back and people were quick to criticize him and say that he was just going to be used by the communist government as a propaganda tool. Warren’s response was that as a minister of the gospel, he would go wherever he could to proclaim the message and the chance that God’s word might penetrate a North Korean heart and transform a life made it a risk he was willing to take.

Somehow Jonah just couldn’t make the distinction between the government and its people. He couldn’t see the people as individuals who may have been doomed to live in an unjust, oppressive system that turned them into what they were. That’s not to let them off the hook for any personal responsibility they bear. That’s why God sent Jonah to preach to them so that they could be told

that they were wrong and be given the opportunity to repent before judgment fell.

It's easy to make excuses for people. A deranged, mentally ill young man goes on a shooting spree and it's easy to ask, "What's wrong with our system and our culture and we want to point fingers and it's difficult to deal with the fact that there are evil people in this world who sometimes do evil things. And even when evil people do evil things, God is still there with his arms extended, wanting to show grace and compassion and to give them the opportunity to repent.

What an opportunity was given to Jonah! Obedience to the call that God places upon us is its own reward. The thought that we, a finite creature, fashioned from the dust of the ground might have the opportunity to be a part of something divine and eternal should be enough of an overwhelming privilege that we gladly say, "Here am I Lord. Send me!"

Jonah was too consumed in his revulsion over what the Ninevites did, that he refused to see the possibility that maybe they could be redeemed. Who do you view as irredeemable? Who would make you mad if they were redeemed? Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer, the Tucson shooter?

If Jonah had gladly gone to Nineveh, they might have erected a statue of him one day as the prophet of God who taught us the truth and fundamentally transformed our nation from cruel and ruthless to just and compassionate.

Jonah gets a second chance and he goes and preaches. He preaches 5 words in Hebrew and 8 words in the English translation. 3:10 says, "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

Most preachers would be humbled, overjoyed, grateful if they had the privilege of going into the belly of the beast and seeing the beast changed. Not Jonah. Verse 1 says Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

Paul Yonggi Cho is pastor of the largest church in the world. Several years ago, as his ministry was becoming international, he told God, "I will go anywhere to preach the gospel — except Japan." He hated the Japanese with gut-deep loathing because of what Japanese troops had done to the Korean people and to members of Yonggi Cho's own family during WWII. The Japanese were his Ninevites.

Through a combination of a prolonged inner struggle, several direct challenges from others, and finally an urgent and starkly worded invitation, Cho felt called by God to preach in Japan. He went, but he went with bitterness. The first speaking engagement was to a pastor's conference? 1,000 Japanese pastors. Cho stood up to speak, and what came out of his mouth was this: "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you." And then he broke and wept. He was both brimming and desolate with hatred.

At first one, then two, then all 1,000 pastors stood up. One by one they walked up to Yonggi Cho, knelt at his feet and asked

forgiveness for what they and their people had done to him and his people. As this went on, God changed Yonggi Cho. The Lord put a single message in his heart and mouth: "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Sometimes God calls us to do what we least want to do in order to reveal our heart— to reveal what's really in our heart. How powerful is the blood of Christ? Can it heal hatred between Koreans and Japanese? Can it make a Jew love a Ninevite? Can it make you reconciled to – well, you know who?

You could say that Jonah had an inaccurate view of God. He had wrong ideas about who God was and what He valued. I'm not sure that would be an accurate statement. Jonah knew exactly (perhaps as much as any human being can know) what the character of God was and he had a dread of what God would do which was why he didn't want to go to Nineveh and why he was so ticked off here when things go down in Nineveh the way that they do.

When he preaches and the people repent, rather than being jubilant and having that deep down satisfaction and joy when you know God has used you, he says, "God I knew it. I knew what kind of God you are. You're too soft. You're a pushover. You look at these evil people and you love them and use me to bring your love to them. What's wrong with you God? I didn't want any part of this so that's why I fled to Tarshish.

What kind of God is it that looks at a powerful, corrupt, wicked – we might even say godless nation that is responsible for some really evil things and decides to give them another chance?

It's the same kind of God that looks at a rebellious prophet who runs off like some kind of spoiled little brat who doesn't want to do he's been told and gives him a second chance to get it right.

It's the same kind of God who looks at a hardened cynical White House counsel who had the reputation of being Richard Nixon's hatchet man and who winds up going to prison over corruption charges and brings Christian people into his life and gives him a second chance. A God who uses him to establish an international ministry to prisoners and their families and who makes him into one of the leading Christian statesmen of our day.

It's the same kind of God who takes the leading persecutor of the church and strikes him down on the Damascus Road and then uses this man in a way that no other mere mortal has ever been used before or since.

Jonah said "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity, dang it!" I was sure looking forward to calamity coming upon Nineveh!

Jeremiah said, " ⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.[16] ⁹ And if at another time I

announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted,¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”

That just rocked Jonah’s world. He was a prophet and prophets are used to bringing forth words of judgment and rebuke. It’s easy to become so angry and worked up over the evil in the world that you refuse to see or believe that it could ever be redeemed. It’s possible to be such an advocate for justice and to have such righteous indignation over the evil and wrong in the world that your world becomes seeing that person punished. I alluded to Chuck Colson a moment ago. I remember a lady in my former church telling me that when news of his conversion came out and he was released from prison and began to go on the Christian speaking circuit, he gave his testimony at a Billy Graham crusade in Baltimore. She went and Colson was booed by some in the crowd. Now that’s pretty bad when you get booed at a Billy Graham crusade.

Jonah says, “I don’t want to live in a world where evil-doers get off scot-free.” Once again, he’s ready to die. I would rather die than live in this kind of a moral universe where wickedness and evil are not decisively punished. He may have had some concern for his own reputation as a prophet because what he prophesied against Nineveh didn’t come true.

God asks him a question. Isn’t it interesting how many times in the Scripture God just asks a question. When someone is in a completely irrational snit and they’re so absorbed in their own version of reality and they’re just spittin’ mad, there’s no reasoning with them. God does plant this seed of thought in his mind, “It’s not about you.”

Jonah went and sat down at a place east of the city. He found a nice spot with a good view of the city and he makes a shelter and sits down in the shade and just gets ready for the fireworks that he knows are coming. Then a vine springs up. It was an act of compassion from God toward his prophet. Jonah can throw a temper tantrum but God still has compassion. Jonah can miss the point completely, but that doesn’t mean that God’s going to write him off.

Having a nice shade bush to sit under can do a lot for attitude adjustment, so Jonah was happy about the vine. We don’t know what kind of vine it was. Some people speculate that it was a castor oil plant that would grow quickly. It really doesn’t matter and it’s not important. The point to remember is that it was the gracious provision of God who now was not only having to deal with the sin of the Ninevites, but also with the tantrum thrown by his prophet. When things are going Jonah’s way, he’s happy. Isn’t it ironic that Nineveh repents and he gets angry, a vine springs up to give him a little bit of shade and he gets happy.

God is dealing with his prophet, and a group of people who are far from him so that they may come to know him. He’s trying to bring the two of them together. Someone said Jonah’s attitude was like a little poem by Jonathan Swift, the great satirist. We are God’s chosen few/ all others will be damned/ There is place in heaven for you/we can’t have heaven crammed.”

Jonah's happy. He's in the middle east which is notoriously hot and arid. Shade can be hard to come by and when he gets a nice shady spot to watch Nineveh get torched, that's just a good thing. All good things come to an end though and the next morning, a worm comes along which has also been sent by God, and it chews the vine so the vine withers. Then a scorching east wind, known as a sirocco comes along and makes life really unpleasant for Jonah. The sirocco is a dry, hot wind that is known to affect the moods of people so much that a crime committed during the time of the winds will often be treated more leniently.

The activity of God and the weather conditions and just being hot and irritable was too much for Jonah to bear. Again, he says, "It would be better for me to die than to live." Why didn't God just say, "Okay, then and smite him down on the spot?" Maybe he knew Jonah was just blowing off steam. Maybe in spite of it all, he still had plans for Jonah.

Again, he asks a question. "There are 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" There are people there who are not able to know which way is which. Doesn't mean that they were unintelligent or incapable of figuring things out. They were vulnerable, though. They were impressionable. They had animals who were subject to their care and who were impacted by their ways. Shouldn't God be concerned about them too?

Missiologists today like to seize upon the question, "Should I not be concerned about that city?" They point out to us that the trend always has been and always will be of people moving toward the cities in search of community and opportunity. If we're going to reach the world, shouldn't we, too, be concerned about the great cities of our world that are ripe unto harvest?"

I grew up near a big city and I'm at home in the big city environment. I appreciate the challenges of doing ministry in the city. We're rural people and we'd be happy with our 40 acres and a mule, but it may be that God would say to some of our young people, "I want you in the city so you can be a part of something that can make a great difference in our society and our culture.

The bigger issue, though, is that in Nineveh, there were 120,000 people who were far from God in their thinking and their outlook. They didn't think much about God or how to please him. That phrase far from God is interesting. We think they're far from God, but God isn't far from them. These people who were thought to be so irredeemable and wicked, God sees what they're doing and His first instinct is to want to show them grace. The ones that Jonah wanted to receive judgment, God loved them. That person that you think, "They deserve to fry. I wouldn't want to stand in their shoes on judgment day, it may be that God wants you to be the one to bring them His grace.

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