

TO NINEVEH AND BEYOND, IV  
THE GRACE OF GOD

So, Nineveh is saved! That's the good news from last week's installment of the Jonah story. "God changed God's mind about the calamity he had said that he would bring upon {Nineveh}; and God did not do it." The end, right? The hero and heroine ride off into the sunset, "and they all live happily ever after." How sweet! How satisfying.

But that's not what happens in this story. Yes, it's a piece of fiction, but it ain't no fairy tale. And the purported hero, Jonah, doesn't ride off into the sunset, rather, he hangs around outside of Nineveh and sulks. It is a denouement to end all denouements--so to speak.

"Denouement," says Webster, it's from the French meaning "to untie" It means, "the final outcome of the main dramatic complications in a literary work." You know, like the final scene in the Wizard of Oz, where Dorothy wakes up safe and sound in her own bed and realizes that all the folks on the farm in Kansas were characters in Oz. But I digress. One would think that God saving Nineveh would be the end of it. Oh, maybe a word or two about everybody shaking off their ashes and changing into business attire and getting back to work. Or maybe how the Ninevites packed the pagan temples to offer up prayers of thanksgiving. But no, the action shifts back to Jonah. Which I guess makes sense. After all, the book's not called Nineveh. It's called Jonah.

"But all this," writes the story teller, "was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." He just plain didn't like what God had done--or not done. And he lays into the Holy One. "What a disappointment!" he says. "I just knew this is what you'd do! I mean all the way back in the beginning of this fiasco when you told me to go to Nineveh and warn them you were going to bring down their city, I said to myself, 'Jonah, old boy, why bother? God wouldn't do that! He's too much of a softy. He'll give them a good scare, and then, when they come whining to him about how awful it would be, he'll cave. You just know--he'll cave. No sir, I'm not going to be part of this charade--I'm going to Spain. Maybe I can catch a bullfight while I'm there--have some tapas--drink a little sangria.' And God that's what I started out to do. But no, God, you sent that storm and that fish, and practically forced me to go to Nineveh anyway. And so, I did--I told them their geeseis cooked, just like you told me to. But no, you couldn't stick to the plan. And you did just what I knew youwould do. You backed down. For crying out loud, God--now they are all celebrating, and I have been made to look the fool!"

And then, just to emphasize his point, Jonah turns martyr. Sheds a few crocodile tears. And whines, big time. “Why don’t you just kill me on the spot! That would be better than this humiliation!”

But God just shakes the divine head. God thought Jonah would have learned his lesson. God’s grace is so deep and so wide, that it encompasses everyone. You know, grace--when you are loved and cared for simply because you are you, when you are forgiven out of the goodness of someone’s heart--not for any reason, not because you’ve done something noble or good. Grace can’t be earned, it’s just given. And God has granted grace, a second chance, to the Ninevites. And for that matter to Jonah. Out of love. Pure and simple. And, really, it is a beautiful thing! But Jonah just doesn’t see it that way. “Is it right for you to be angry?” asks God. Really Jonah, is it any skin off your nose that I granted the Ninevites a reprieve?

You can just hear Jonah. Grumbling to himself as he stalks out of the city to a nearby hill and sets up a little shelter for himself. And broods. Meanwhile, the temperature is rising. I mean, this is the desert! And despite his little shelter, Jonah’s not just getting hot under the collar, he’s sweating right through his deodorant. Sweats pouring down his face. His shirt’s sticking to his skin.

But God’s not done with Jonah. Not yet. So the Holy One causes a plant to grow up quicker than lightening. “To save Jonah from his discomfort,” says the story teller. Or, a literal translation of the Hebrew, “to save [Jonah] from his evil.” The plant’s a big, leafy one--with lots of shade. Maybe a castor oil plant. Or a huge gourd. And the shade is just what the doctor ordered. Jonah flips open a cool drink and settle back. Now he’s comfortable. And finally, he falls asleep.

But then in the morning, there’s one more twist in the story. One more attempt on God’s part to teach Jonah a lesson. The Holy One rustles up a worm, and sends it over to Jonah’s shelter, and has it chomp down the plant. A bite here, a bite there, and **TIMBER**. Down it goes. No more shade. And on top of that, God orders a hot easterly wind, a scirocco to come roaring in to blow hot air and no doubt sand right in Jonah’s face. And Jonah is furious. “Just let me die!” he bellows. As one scholar writes, “The encounters with the plant, the worm and the wind have not proved educational experiences for Jonah. He has not moved past his wish to die.” (*Old Testament Library: Jonah*, 98)

“Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” asks God.

Of course, it is, says Jonah, it ticks me off so much so I just want to kick the bucket!

Oh Jonah, says God. You’ve not learned a thing here! You’re angry about the bush because it directly impacted your own comfort. You didn’t do anything to create it. You didn’t even

have to water it, or spread manure at its roots. You just got the benefit of its shade. Free of charge. And now you're upset that the worm chomped it down. And I understand. I'd probably be angry too. But here's the thing Jonah, you make it sound as if I should not be concerned about creatures I did make. You make it sound as if I shouldn't be worried about the Ninevites. Sure, they are rather dimwitted at times, don't know their proverbial hind sides from their elbows. But Jonah, that doesn't matter to me. Dumb or smart, rich or poor, young or old, I love 'em all. I care about all people. And not just the people of Nineveh--and there are a bunch of them, 120,000 according to the last census--but I also care about all the animals. Isn't that my right?

And there it ends. That's it. End of dénouement. End of story. Just a question: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh?" We don't know what happens to Jonah, or to Nineveh or to any of the characters in the story. It's not like those movies based on true stories that end with pictures of the real people, and captions like, "Tom Smith grew up to be a lawyer, and is living with his wife and three children in Los Angeles." There's nothing like that here. What we are left with is a question. "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?" And this is intentional. Indeed, the storyteller really is asking each of us the same question. Shouldn't God be concerned about everybody? Even Ninevites? Even us? And shouldn't God's grace be extended to everyone? Not just those who've done good things. Not just those who we judge to be deserving? For grace is by definition, free. No charge. You're granted grace just because someone loves you.

This week I heard a story from a former parishioner who volunteers in a nursing home up north. One of her patients is a woman in her seventies with Parkinson's and advanced dementia. Her conversations with the patient made very little sense, but still she visited with her on a regular basis. In doing so, she realized that her patient's husband would come and sit with his wife every day, basically all day. But then came the corona virus, and the husband was told he could no longer come to see her as the nursing home was on lock down. The dementia patient grew more and more restless. Having another patient with her in the room only made her more anxious and fearful. The staff soon realized that it was her husband's constant presence that had kept her calm through the many months. After much consultation, they made the husband an offer. If he would move into her room, they would provide an extra bed and meals, at no charge. He just had to agree not to leave. Which he did--and his wife has been greatly comforted. That my friends, on so many levels, is grace at work. Love for another, just because.

Don Giuseppe Beradelli was a beloved priest in northern Italy. He was well known for helping his parishioners when they were in trouble, even providing financial assistance when needed. Like so many in Italy, he contracted Covid19. And eventually ended up in the hospital. In

Italy supplies and equipment are severely limited, requiring triage--the making of those hard decisions about who gets what, who gets saved. Father Beradelli, though, was one of the fortunate ones, and was to be granted a ventilator. But when he heard about a younger man, one he did not know personally, in severe trouble and needing a ventilator, he volunteered to give up his so that the young man might be helped. The change was made--and as a result Father Beradelli died March 15th. Grace at work, love even for the stranger.

As I was finishing up this sermon, my phone rang. Much to my surprise it was Pastor Mike Barnes. Members of our congregation may remember Mike is the pastor of Jerusalem Church of God in Christ in East Fort Myers. It was his choir that inspired us on Gospel Sunday in February. Pastor Mike and I had met for lunch a couple of weeks after that Sunday, and had spent two hours talking about ourselves, our congregations, and what we might do together. It was a fruitful conversation. But shortly thereafter I got caught up in the virus issues, and hadn't really thought much further about it. Many folks in Mike's congregation live on an economic edge all the time. So, you might imagine Mike was calling to see if we could be of some help for them. But that was not the purpose of his call. "I know you have a lot of elderly folks in your church," he said, "and I just wanted to make sure they were doing OK." We talked a bit, as I assured him so far, so good. I offered our assistance if he needed access to resources. And then we prayed together over the phone. I was in near tears. "God bless you," I said as we closed off the conversation. "And God bless you, Pastor." It was a true touch of grace. Love for others, just because.

Jonah ends with a question--shouldn't God be concerned about Nineveh? And clearly, the story teller would say yes. For that is what grace is all about. But there is also another question, an implied question. Shouldn't we? Shouldn't we be concerned about our families, the strangers, and those we may have just met? I think the story teller would answer yes to that as well. For that, my friends, is how God's grace gets expressed. Through you and me and the ways we reach out to others. Now in the midst of this pandemic, and always.

Amen

John H. Danner