

## ***Jonah Sits at the Table of Grace***

Sunday, September 24, 2023

Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16

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They ran out of there like Jonah when he was spit from the fish.

But if all we know about Jonah is that he ends up on a beach reeking of fish guts, then perhaps we really do not know this story. Or, perhaps we have blunted its edges so that the power of God's boundless grace, steadfast love, and unending mercy is lost on us. It is a story filled with humor and irony, a rip-roaring fable of faith that has power to change us, if we listen. But not just listen: if we allow it to elevate us from our normal everyday experiences and to experience this as a life-changing moment of mercy infused with hilarity.

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Act one concludes, of course, when a storm arises, scaring the captain and the crew. Jonah understands what is happening and volunteers as tribute. He tells the crew, “I am a Hebrew. I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” And this is important: his belief in God is unquestionable. Jonah tells the sailors to throw him off the ship, whereupon he is swallowed by the fish.

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Act II takes place inside the belly of the fish. This is the part of the story that captivates us, causing us to ask all sorts of questions. But the point is not to consider how or even if this took place, but to be astonished at the ways of God. Jonah prays for three days and three nights in that belly. He knows about God’s mercy.

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Act II ends with the part of the story the preschool boys at Mother’s Day Out Chapel time love the best: the fish spits Jonah up on the beach. Barfing jokes are big with preschool boys.

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As he sits there sipping his coffee, Jonah begins thinking about the past few days. He realizes now that there is never any way to escape God's presence. He calls to mind that great Psalm-prayer:

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Act III is all about reminders of that expansive grace. It is a grace that meets us where we are, and invites us to come sit at Christ's table. Today's table is not a private dining room, but rather a potluck where gifts are shared. There's always enough to eat at a potluck. As he preaches, this is what Jonah discovers. He discovers that the promise of God is this invitation to a great and never-ending potluck. Perhaps it was not surprising that a guy who smells like the inside of a fish would attract attention. But what is surprising is that the message of God's mercy resonates deep within the people of Ninevah. It changes them. What is surprising is that Jonah shows up at the potluck, even if he's afraid someone might bring tuna noodle casserole.

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And that makes him mad. He's like the laborers in Matthew's story who have worked all day in the sun but still get paid as much as the ones who only worked for an hour. That's no way to run a business, but it is the way of God's inscrutable mercy. The laborers, and Jonah, are not mad because they didn't get paid enough. Instead, they are mad because they were all treated the same. Insiders like Jonah, who had heard and heeded God's prophesies and instructions know of the great mercy of God. They had been listening and trusting in God – why should God care about people who had rejected him time and time again?

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When the plant dies, and Jonah is sunburnt, he still does not understand. Even when God explains it all, he does not seem to understand. He knows about God's love; but has he experienced that Amazing Grace?

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