

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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John Crosby  
Against the Tide: God's Compassion  
Jonah 4**

A couple of weeks ago if I asked you to tell me all you know about Jonah, you probably would have said, "Well, there's something about a whale." Jonah and the whale. You probably wouldn't have known that it's a Book in the Old Testament, but today you can reach forward and find it without a problem, right? Everybody reach forward and grab a Bible and find Jonah. Remember, we know it's between Obadiah and Micah in the Old Testament. The page we want today is 1,383, the end of the story of Jonah. Please open it up because I want you to underline a couple of sentences in there. Sarah [Sarah Norton, Director of Kids' Ministries] has already told the story at a kid level, so I thought that instead of me reading it, you could hear the story from people to whom it is not just a story. We'll show it up on the screens. It will take just a minute.

*(Video begins.)*

The Lord came to Jonah. "Go to the great city of Nineveh," but Jonah found a ship to flee from the Lord. And such a storm arose that they knew he was running away from the Lord. Then Jonah said, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea." By this time the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord, and the Lord commanded the fish and vomited Jonah onto dry land.

The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, "Go to the great city of Nineveh." Jonah obeyed the Word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, all of them from the greatest to the lowest. When God saw their sorrow, He did not bring this affliction upon them.

*(Video ends.)*

The city of Nineveh not only really existed, it really exists. It is in Iraq, a different reference point for us to think that God, who spoke so long ago to the people of Nineveh, might still be speaking to them and to us. I'd like to read you the last part of the story, the rest of the story, the last 10 percent, and pull out a pen or a pencil if you don't mind so you can underline something. Chapter 3 ends this way.

<sup>10</sup>When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked ways, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*.

4 But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew..."

The next line is what I'd like you to underline.

...for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.

One of the Old Testament purposes is to show what God is like. "This is the kind of God I know You are." And Jonah hates that.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."

<sup>4</sup> The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" <sup>5</sup> Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.

Maybe, maybe....

<sup>6</sup> So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.

<sup>7</sup> But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."

<sup>9</sup> Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." <sup>10</sup> Then the LORD said, "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. <sup>11</sup> Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

That's how the story ends. It's like it ends in the middle of a sentence, right? Here's what I'd like you to do. I'd like you to underline verse 10.

"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. <sup>11</sup> Should I not have compassion...."

Your translation may say *concern*. In the margins, write the word *compassion*. They are the same thing in Hebrew.

<sup>11</sup> Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

I think part of the reason that the story ends so abruptly as if it's not the end is, it's not the end. The story of Jonah is not yet over even when the Book of Jonah is over. The very first week we started to learn together about Jonah, Brad said, "Jonah is the story of how God calls people and then decides whether or not they are listening by their response." Some people hear God, and they turn to God and say yes. Other people hear God and they run away. "I don't want to do that." Or they pretend that they can't hear God. "Are we listening to God or are we running away?" was Brad's question. God is still looking for people who will listen when He calls. God is looking for people who will run *into* the fire.

Two weeks ago in Boston, we saw people who were willing to run *into* the fire. In the explosion in Texas, we saw people willing to run *into* the fire to save others. It is easy to be the church and sit here and send checks. It is easy to do what we did yesterday. Actually, it was a wonderful time. Twenty percent of our worshipping population, 20 percent of us, went and spent time with the poor. I've got to tell you, that's great but it's easy. It is not complex. What's complex is when we interact with the poor. What's complex is when we start to tackle issues like civil rights or temperance or abortion or morality. That's when God stops preaching and starts meddling. When God calls and we turn and say, "Excuse me, I think this is for you."

There was an archbishop in Latin America, in Brazil, who became an archbishop because he was so wonderful with the poor, Dom Helder Camara. He said, "When I went out and fed the poor, the people loved me and said, 'He's a saint,' and they made me a bishop. As a bishop, when I went out and fed the poor, they said, 'He's a saint,' and they loved me. But when I turned to the people in my flock and asked why the poor do not have food, they called me a Communist." There is an innate unpopularity sometimes in the call of God. Not all the time but sometimes. When God asks you, "Why does this world look so different from My Kingdom?" what are you going to say?

The first week Jonah learned the lesson of being called, and he learned it in the belly of the whale. The second week we talked about courage, the difference between believing in God and following God. Many of us sit here and believe all this stuff. We are learning this stuff and have notebooks filled with this stuff. We believe there is a God. We believe in Jesus, but there is a difference between believing and following. Jonah is called to be a follower, to follow God to Nineveh.

Jonah was called, you and I are called, to be an ambassador of God, and that takes courage. There are some people who think they are ambassadors of God but, really, they are terrorists of truth. We've seen some of those lately, haven't we? Terrorists of truth who set off bombs and kill children and raise terrorists of truth, who go to the funerals of our soldiers and make protests about gay people. Terrorists of truth. That's not what God is calling Jonah to do. That's not what God is calling you to do. He wants you to become an ambassador of reconciliation, speaking the truth so that reconciliation will happen. That doesn't take less courage; that takes more. It's easier to be angry than it is to speak the truth with love.

A couple of weeks ago one of those ambassadors of truth died. His name was Brennan Manning. This is what Brennan looked like. (*Slide shown.*) I feel like I have a lot in common with him. He was called the Ragamuffin. Roman Catholic parents. Family of drinkers. Gift of gab. Much the same. He would come into the room and you would say, "I have never met someone so winsome in my life." You wouldn't realize till later that some of what he said didn't make

sense because he was drunk. He was a drunk and when he was drunk, he hit his wife, but he was a prophet at the same time. Actually, Brennan came here and spoke at the Upper Room.

“The temptation of our age,” Brennan said, “is to look good without being good.” This is what he said about courage. “I want neither a terrorist spirituality that keeps me in a perpetual state of fright about being in right relationship with my heavenly Father nor a sappy spirituality that portrays God as such a benign teddy bear that there is no aberrant behavior or desire [of mine] that he will not condone. I want a relationship with the real Abba of the real Jesus, who is infinitely compassionate with my brokenness and at the same time an awesome, incomprehensible, and unwieldy mystery.”

I want a relationship with the real Father of the real Jesus filled with grace and holiness. Courage to speak the truth. Lee [Pastor Lee Hanssen] talked about that last week, about that courage. Remember, he talked about hard conversations that require you listening to hard things and saying hard things. If you did not have a chance to hear last week’s sermon, I urge you to go online. He talked about the courage that God blesses when we are willing to have hard conversations.

Jonah had that courage. He gets spat out of the belly of the whale, goes to Nineveh, and starts having a hard conversation. “Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed.” This is not the guy you invite to your parties. Forty days. Courageously, he gives the message for three days, and then walks out of the city and turns around and waits for vindication. “Okay, God. Forty days are up. Get ‘em!” But he has to learn one more lesson. He has learned about a calling from God and courage to follow and not just believe. Now he has to learn that God’s truth seekers, who I pray this afternoon will be you, have to have compassion. That’s why I had you underline that verse in chapter 4. “I knew what kind of God You are. That’s why I ran away. You are a gracious God and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love. You want to save everybody.” Jonah hates that. He wants God to save him and his friends and the rest of them, literally, can go to hell.

Before we get too angry with Jonah or feel like he is just a weirdo, Jonah has good reason to hate the Ninevites. God sending Jonah to Nineveh is like God sending you to watch your child’s killer walk out of the jailhouse free. God sending Jonah to Nineveh is like God sending a Jew to watch the Germans saying, “Hey, I’m sorry about the Holocaust. It was a mistake.” And God saying, “I forgive you.” Jonah goes, “Wait a minute! Really?” That’s why Jonah is angry. But without compassion, we are just terrorists of truth, and the world has no reason to listen to that truth.

Andrew Marin said it took him a long while living in the gay community in Chicago to figure out why he was there. He said, “I didn’t have a clue why I was there for a long time, but I finally figured out my job is not to win arguments, but to change people’s behavior. My job is to bring people to the Savior by the way that I love them and let the Savior do what the Savior can do alone.” Compassionate telling of the truth is what we are called to be about. Calling that you can either run away from or listen for, courage to follow and not just believe. Compassion rather than being judgmental leads to the end of Jonah’s story. Compassion and conviction.

“Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed.” The people listened and tore their clothes and said, “We’ll change.” And God saved the Ninevites. Do you think God saved Jonah? I think Jonah was in as much trouble as the Ninevites were. He thought God loved him and nobody else. You

and I can feel like God loves us and nobody else. Does God change Jonah the way He changed the people of Nineveh? Let me tell you, I think when the story ends and Nineveh is not destroyed and Jonah is sitting there baking, he comes to a new view of God. Let me give you one more quote from Brennan Manning, [*The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out*].

“Because salvation is by grace through faith, I believe that among the countless number of people standing in front of the throne [at the end of time] and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands (see Revelation 7:9), I shall see the prostitute from the Kit-Kat Ranch in Carson City, Nevada, who tearfully told me that she could find no other employment to support her two-year-old son. I shall see the woman who had an abortion and is haunted by guilt and remorse but did the best she could faced with grueling alternatives; the businessman besieged with debt who sold his integrity in a series of desperate transactions; the insecure clergyman addicted to being liked, who never challenged his people from the pulpit and longed for unconditional love; [I will see at the throne] the sexually abused teen molested by his father and now selling his body on the street, who, as he falls asleep each night after his last 'trick', whispers the name of the unknown God he learned about in Sunday school.

'But how [will these people be at the throne]?' we ask.

Then the voice says, 'They have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

There they are. There *\*we\** are - the multitude who so wanted to be faithful, who at times got defeated, soiled by life, and bested by trials, wearing the bloodied garments of life's tribulations, but through it all clung to faith.

My friends, if this is not good news to you, you have never understood the gospel of grace.”

I think the reason we know Jonah got that is because the story of Jonah is in the Bible and who would tell this story other than Jonah? The people of Nineveh wouldn't tell it this way, would they? They would talk about this superhero who came at great risk and preached salvation to them and they were saved. Well, that's not the story of Jonah. Jonah is the story of Jonah, the jerk, and who tells this story? Jonah, the jerk, is the only one who could have told the whole story. That's why the Bible is so powerful. It is not the story of brave people. It is the story of people like you and like me, like Peter, the coward, who runs away, David, the adulterer, Moses, who doesn't want to speak up. It is the story of people like you and like me, who get the grace of God deep into them and then walk out into the world and God uses them anyway like He used Jonah, like He is calling to use you. You!

The reason that I know that Jonah turned it around is because of the end of the story. We started with a video of the people of Nineveh telling the story of Jonah. May I give you 45 seconds more of what happened in Nineveh.

*(Video begins.)*

We don't know what it is to fast. The Christian people would *fast for three days*. They do this every year because they did in Nineveh. On the third day the Christians meet for Mass at church.

*(Video ends.)*

Because Jonah went to Nineveh 2,700 years ago, there is still a God in Nineveh in Iraq. There are still followers of Jesus in Iraq. Wrap your brain around that! And every year for three days, they fast and say, "Thank you, God, for the three days that Jonah spent in the belly of the whale. Give us grace." There is still life in Iraq because someone spoke God's truth. Is there somebody in your world right now whom God is calling you to talk to? Not to get up and say, "You need to know about Jesus," but for you to tell hard truth or loving truth to? Is there somebody God wants you to have a conversation with who can start a journey from death to life? Are you willing to have your life disrupted so that other people might live? Or are you going to run away?

Lord God, I thank You for my sisters and brothers here, who are just like me. We talk pretty and we live messy. We want to believe, but we're not crazy to follow. We want You to take care of our enemies but not to *take care of* our enemies. I ask that You will give us ears to hear Your voice and eyes to see the people, who need to hear Your Word. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*