

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**March 7, 2021, The Third Sunday of Lent**

Matthew 12: 38-42, Jonah 3:10-4:11

**LENTEN SERMON SERIES: “THE SIGN OF JONAH – “GOD IS GOD OF ALL”**

I'd like to begin this sermon with another thank-you to the Rev. Judy Anderson-Bauer, my friend and a Lutheran pastor in Duluth with whom I've collaborated on this Jonah sermon series that is ending today.

As I begin let me say that we both agree that the sentence “*and also many animals,*” is a great line of Scripture, and a great ending to this little book of Jonah.

Poor old Jonah. He finally does what God asks, and against all odds, is even successful.

The whole city of Nineveh repents.

Even the animals fasted and repented!

Meanwhile, Jonah has gone outside of the city, pulled up a seat, popped some popcorn and is all ready for the fireworks to begin. It reminds me of how gleeful folks who read all those “Left Behind” books were, hoping for all the unbelievers to get what was coming to them.

But our God is a God of mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And also, it seems, willing to have a change of plans.

So, when Jonah's lackluster preaching actually got results, God pressed the “abort” button, and cancelled the planned destruction of Nineveh.

Which really miffed old Jonah. His whining in these few short verses is really over the top! You can just see him flinging himself down on the ground and whining, “OK FINE God, just leave me here to die, its better for me to die than to live.”

I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, so what was the point? I could just die! You are letting them live; you're letting them off the hook, no destruction??? I could just die!”

That's the trouble with grace – if I want it for myself, I also have to allow it for those I don't like so much.

Grace isn't just something we get to lay claim to.

Grace, God's deep and boundless and abundant love, is given freely to one and all, even the “many animals.”

In our hardness of heart, we would like to be stingy, carefully, miserly doling out God's love, only to the most deserving of course, like a dragon clutching hoarded gold.

Isn't it a good thing that you and I and Jonah aren't God!

But it's more than that. This little book is trying to broaden our minds, to help us see the whole world as God's world.

Jonah's story is nudging strongly to see that there is no more “us” and “them.” That's just something we humans have made up. It is not God; all people are God's people.

The little book of Jonah was written at a time when Israel was cracking down on all those “others,” those who were not pureblood Hebrews, those outsiders who were Gentiles.

Books like Ezra and Nehemiah were telling the people of Israel that God wanted them to be exclusive, to keep themselves apart from their heathen neighbors.

Those books were all about Israel's exceptionalism,  
 about how God loved them and only them,  
 and everyone else was subject to God's wrath.

In the face of that extreme nationalism and prejudice, this little book slyly and comically makes fun of that view of God, and shows the heathen sailors, as well as the entire heathen city of Nineveh as not only eligible for God's grace, but in many ways more deserving of it than the faithful Hebrew prophet, Jonah.

This book pokes fun at the stodgy, exclusiveness of Israel, and makes the bold claim that God is God of all: all the world, all humans, and all animals, too.

And then . . . well, it's up to us to figure out where we land.  
 Are we going to be like Jonah, miserly in our belief that God is for us and us alone?  
 Or are we going to chuckle, and shake our heads over our own narrowness,  
 and marvel over the vastness and inclusion of God's love?  
 Can we admit that our God is so big and so deep and so boundless that we know that we don't know,  
 that we admit we are unable to contain  
 or even to imagine the expanse of God's mercy and love?

Jonah is a wry challenge to us, especially when we are feeling cranky and judgmental about "those" people.

In those moments of silliness:

Jonah trying to run away from God, 3,000 miles away from God,  
 Jonah being swallowed by a great big fish,  
 Jonah's reluctance to walk the three days across Nineveh, so only walking one day in,  
 Jonah's reluctance to say more than a few words to call them to repent, and  
 Jonah's anger at God for God's goodness,  
     we find our own hardness of heart exposed,  
     and our own silliness and selfishness revealed.

It is a book that gently and humorously encourages self-examination.

Sometimes in not so subtle ways.

Can **we** allow God to be God?

Are we willing to say:

we are foolish to try to contain God's love and mercy,  
 hoarding it only for those who worship like us, who believe like us, who look like us?

The book of Jonah is a mirror, showing us our own flaws.

But, dear children of God, it is also a mirror that we hold up to God,  
 which shows us that the God of all creation, all humans and also many animals,  
 is merciful,  
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

It shows us just how amazing Grace can actually be.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound!*

*That saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost, but now am found.*

*Was blind, but now I see.*

Amen.