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Jonah 4:1-2, NRSV.

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

Forgiveness for Nineveh.

Many years ago, I walked into a Bank in southern California. I was in grad school at USC, and the bank was near the university, and not in what some people would consider a "safe" neighborhood. USC is in the inner city. I was depositing a paper payroll check from my job as a Research Assistant. My check had the name Roger King on it. When I walked up to a tall desk to stand at and sign my check, I noticed a man next to me also signing a check. His check also said Roger King. I was a hundred thirty-pound white guy. He was a two hundred something-pound African American guy. (I was a runner back then). I naively turned to him and said, "Hey, my name is Roger King, too". He did not smile at me. He grunted and shook his head and then mumbled something I will not repeat. But then, just as I was walking away, he obviously felt bad and said, "Nice to meet you." We ended

up talking for a couple of minutes. He told me just a bit about himself – and I thought of him as I was rereading Jonah from the Book of the 12 recently.

Jonah is in the middle of the Book of Twelve. The content would place Jonah in the 8th century B.C., around 785, during the height of the Assyrian Empire, which was the civilization that would destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But most scholars believe that it was written much later, possibly during the 4th century B.C., long after the return of the exiles from Judah who had been sent to Babylon. Remember that Babylon conquered the Southern Kingdom, Judah, 136 years after the downfall of the Northern Kingdom, and then sent many of Judah's residents into exile for 70 years. So, Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.; Judah fell in 586 B.C., but the Book of Jonah wasn't written until about 450 to 550 B.C., very roughly. Thus, Jonah was written two hundred to three hundred years after the fact. One reason we don't worry about exactly when it was written is that the entire book is thought to be a parable and not something that we were ever expected to believe was real history. Here is summary of Jonah.

There are four chapters. In the first, God calls upon Jonah, to go to the powerful but wicked capital of Assyria, Nineveh, and prophesize to them about the eventual consequences of their sins. Jonah immediately resists the call and in fact, flees by getting on a ship and sailing to the far end, the western end of the

Mediterranean, to a city called Tarshish. The reason for him trying to escape the Lord isn't specified, and we might guess it's because he is afraid to enter a great enemy city. But in truth, he is probably aware that God is looking to save these people, those violent pagans, and Jonah, being an Israelite, hates them. But there is a great storm on the sea. The ship starts to break apart. The sailors are in a panic, and they conclude that Jonah is responsible for their desperate situation. Jonah admits that he is a Hebrew who is running away from God. They throw him overboard. A great fish, often referred to in modern times as a whale, swallows him. He is inside the fish for 3 days and 3 nights.

In Chapter two, Jonah utters a long prayer, written as poetry. He realizes that God, not the sailors, have cast him into the sea. Something to keep in mind is that the Israelites were never a seafaring people, and they lived in fear of the sea and the dangerous creatures that inhabited it. This tale of the great fish would have resounded powerfully among Israelite readers. Jonah, in his prayer looks forward to worshipping in the Temple once again. He feels his life fading away, however. Jonah promises to offer sacrifices with a grateful heart. At the end of the prayer, the great fish spits him up on dry land.

In Chapter three, God repeats the same command to go east to Nineveh and preach God's Word. Jonah obeys. Jonah one day walks into the vast city and

warns them that God will destroy Nineveh in 40 days. Remember that in the Hebrew Scriptures, 40 represented a complete period of trial or testing, like the 40 years in the desert. The people believe him and they all put on sackcloth. Even the king of Assyrian does this. God decides to have mercy on the people of this evil city and does not harm them.

In the fourth chapter, Jonah is furious. He wanted God to destroy Nineveh. He then tells God that this is indeed why he tried to flee far away to Tarshish – because he knew God could choose to show mercy on anyone. Jonah waits, though, in the heat of the desert, to see if God might still go ahead and destroy the capital of Assyria. God has mercy on Jonah again and provides a leafy plant to give him shade in the intense heat. But Jonah says it would be better for him to die. God chides Jonah for not being thankful for the protection God has given him. The book of Jonah ends with God saying this to the reluctant Prophet:

“Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

As you can see, this reads very much like an extended parable, not unlike something Jesus might dream up. Also note that 120,000 people back then in one city is a lot, but historians think that this could be a true figure. It covered 4,000 acres and was enclosed by massive walls. It might have had a population of

150,000 at its height, if we count its suburbs and surrounded agricultural lands.

Some scholars think that the phrase *“than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left”* refers only to truly innocent people, i.e., children. But the point is that God concludes that there are many, many people in the capital of the warlike empire of Assyria who are simply confused or ignorant and who deserve a chance to come to know God. This is a very powerful story for the Old Testament. These are not Gentiles of Jesus’ time. These are pagans, people who want to conquer and destroy the Chosen People.

This is my favorite passage from Jonah, from the beginning of Chapter 4:

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴ And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

Jonah didn’t run to Tarshish simply because he hated the empire that was a constant threat to his people. He and his nation, Israel, didn’t at that time have a large enough, a powerful enough sense of God, a true understanding of just what God is capable of. He was running away because he was overwhelmed by the notion that God could show this much mercy, that God could bless even the

residents of the capital of the most heinous empire in the region. And Nineveh was probably the biggest city in his known world and therefore the center of all that was a threat to Israel. Jonah, now confronted with the truth, cannot handle it, cannot wrap his brain around such a big God, and so he would prefer to die. So, he sits in the sun, and then in the shade, at God's blessing, hoping against hope that God will decide to destroy the city anyway.

Let's get back to Roger King. He clearly felt bad that he had initially blown me off and said something impolite. After I blurted out that my name was also Roger King and pointed at the check I was depositing, and after he had somewhat rudely dismissed me, he clearly felt bad. He shook his head and said he was sorry, that he had a new job and was working like hell to succeed. He said he was thirty and just starting college part time at USC. Roger said he was under a lot of pressure, but he was determined to make it. He said that he had gotten out of prison two years ago, and that he was married now, and they were expecting a kid. I was in my late twenties and the idea of college, a new job, a wife, and a baby seemed overwhelming to me. He volunteered that he had been in prison for stealing a car, an expensive one, a Porsche 911. He said that his wife was a hardcore Christian and she kept telling him that God will forgive and restore anyone. I wish at the time I had thought to tell him the story of Jonah and the restoration of

the king of Assyria. At the time all I could think of was to wish him well and assure him that people who started college late usually did a lot better because they were more mature and worked harder. He thanked me.

I said earlier that the Book of Jonah is not a traditional Prophet's work, but rather a parable, a story that teaches a lesson and not meant to be taken as history. In fact, there is only one "oracle" or prophecy in the entire book, and it consists of less than a single verse in Chapter three. Below are five verses; the oracle is the second half of verse 4:

***3** The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

Jonah confronts the people in Nineveh with these words:

"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

This is considered the shortest prophecy in the entire Bible. It is not an absolute prophecy. If the citizens of Nineveh turn away from their evil ways immediately, God will spare their city. But we know that Jonah does not want them to believe him. He does not want them to do the right thing. He wants vengeance. When they did obey, he was infuriated. During this period in history, sackcloth was

made from animal hair, usually from goats, and it was scratchy. Wearing it was a sign of humility. Even the king replaced his royal robes with sackcloth. We are surprised that the king would do this, especially in front of his subjects, and after very little urging from the Prophet. These people are not Israelites: it is not part of their culture to listen to and believe Prophets as speaking for God. This all adds to the sense that this is not history.

The focus of the Book of Jonah is simple and two-fold. First, God has his heart open to all humans, no matter what they have been raised to believe and no matter what they have done in the past. This is symbolized by God offering spiritual restoration to the very people who by the time this book was written everyone knew had destroyed the Northern Kingdom and scattered its ten tribes throughout the Assyrian Empire, causing them to be “lost” forever. Only the two tribes of Judah in the south, Benjamin and Levi, survived. Second, Jonah, and all those who claim to believe in God and live by his ways, must let go of bitterness and a need for vengeance against those whom they do not like. In fact, given that many – probably the majority – of people living in the Assyrian Empire were simply common, decent people who couldn’t help where they were born, Jonah was guilty of prejudice. He held a hatred for an entire people because of the actions of a few. Like a good parable, Jonah has an obvious lesson.

People often wonder why Jesus spoke in parables so often and conclude he did so because a largely illiterate population could relate to them easily. In truth, though, parables are present throughout the Old Testament, and so the early followers of Christ were quite comfortable with them. Prominent among them was Jonah. The main reason that the Israelites might have taken this story to be real history is that there is a Prophet named Jonah mentioned in 2 Kings. But I wonder if the original author of the book ever meant it as history.

Here is a quote that we looked at recently. It is from the Book of Romans, written by Paul to a church he had not founded and had not yet had a chance to influence, which is why the book is long and serves largely as a theological introduction to Christianity. Paul writes this in Chapter 9:

¹⁶ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

The Pharaoh did not become a good person, did not embrace God. Instead, God used the already hardened heart of the Pharaoh to serve God's purpose: to propel the Hebrews into the desert and to the Promised Land. But Paul does remind us that God will have mercy on anyone, if that person comes to him. The Lesson of the parable of the Book of Jonah is at the core of our beliefs as

followers of Christ. It is a lesson repeated many times in Scripture, Old and New, Hebrew and Greek.

After encountering Roger King at the bank near USC, I called my father up and told him about the other Roger King. My father's name was also Roger King. My father, who ran a garage, told me that the Porsche 911 was a stupid car to steal, anyway, because its engine was completely behind the rear axle, and so it was extremely hard to control if you hit the brakes at a high speed. My father remarked that there were many, many people in this world who had done far more harm to humanity than stealing a very dangerous sports car.

If the king, the military, and the political leadership of Assyria ever changed its evil ways, as is strongly suggested by the Book of Jonah, this was quite temporary. The Prophet Isaiah predicts that Assyria will fall by an army of God:

⁸ *"Then the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of mortals;
and a sword, not of humans, shall devour him.*

In 2 Chronicles, we are told that a Heavenly army does indeed destroy Assyria:

²⁰ *Then King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz prayed because of this and cried to heaven. ²¹ And the LORD sent an angel who cut off all the mighty warriors and commanders and officers in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned in disgrace to his own land.*

The story of the Book of Jonah should assure us of two things. We can always be redeemed. And we should treat all humans as valued by God.