

**Preacher:** Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Jonah 4:1-11

This Thursday is Thanksgiving, so we gather this morning specifically invited to give thanks to our God, even though this is something Christians do and should practice on a regular basis. But since Thanksgiving is this week, I also want to help you be prepared for family to gather, especially if you are in charge of the meal. According to Craig Boldman and Pete Matthews (authors of *Every Excuse in the Book*), if you burn the Thanksgiving turkey this year, here are a dozen reasons to still be thankful:

1. Salmonella won't be a concern.
2. No one will overeat.
3. Everyone will think it's Cajun blackened.
4. Uninvited guests will think twice next year.
5. Your cheese-broccoli-lima-bean casserole will gain newly found appreciation.
6. Pets won't pester you for scraps.
7. The smoke alarm was due for a test.
8. Carving the bird will provide a good cardiovascular workout.
9. After dinner, the guys can take the bird to the yard and play football.
10. The less turkey Uncle George eats, the less likely he will be to walk around with his pants unbuttoned.
11. You'll get to the desserts quicker.
12. You won't have to face three weeks of turkey sandwiches.

There you go. We can find reasons to be thankful in any moment, even in moments of distress. And nothing says be thankful more than a story about Jonah, right? Well, that might need some explaining, but I promise we will get back to that.

Jonah is a familiar prophet. His story is often told as an example of how one cannot run from God's call. So, we read the story of Jonah and the whale or big fish, ending with his successful call for repentance in Nineveh. We often end there leaving us with a positive view of this prophet from God. But what about this final chapter? What about the discontented Jonah who sits outside of the city fuming because Nineveh listened to his word, repenting of their ways, causing God to change his mind about their destruction. We often think that Jonah's time in the belly of the big fish taught him a valuable lesson, enabling him to go preach with boldness to the great city of Nineveh. Instead we find a Jonah who perhaps half-heartedly goes to Nineveh, still probably smelling of fish innards and seaweed, hoping that he at least would see a good show as God smoked these pagans. But that's not what happened. God's word through Jonah actually works. The people believe God. The king calls all of the nation, including the animals to fast and put on sackcloth, so that God might change his mind.

And God does indeed decide to no longer bring calamity upon Nineveh. The people of Nineveh believed God and repented. That's where we usually end our reading of Jonah. However, the beginning of chapter 4 reads, "But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." He complains to God saying something like "See, this is exactly why I didn't want to do this in the first place; I knew you would be forgiving, so what's the point of me traveling all the way here to condemn these people." Still not entirely convinced that God would not attack the city, he makes himself a temporary shelter so that he can camp outside the city and wait to see what will happen. While he waits, God causes a bush to grow to shelter Jonah, which

pleased him, but shortly after that God caused a worm to destroy the plant so that the sun came down and scorched Jonah's head. Jonah becomes furious and wished for his death. At this point God reproved Jonah saying, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And 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?"

And this is where the story ends. Jonah is not given a chance to respond. God says no more. God is given the last word and Jonah is silenced. When scripture ends like this, it gives us the opportunity to enter into the conversation and let God's words to Jonah also be words for us. When have we been angered by God's grace? What bad priorities do we bear? What things do we care about more than people, even our enemies?

You see Nineveh is not just any city; it is an Assyrian city. If you think back to what we just read at the end of Kings a few weeks ago, it is the Assyrians who carried off Israel into exile. They destroyed the homes of God's people and removed the people from the land that God promised them. They were Israel's greatest enemy. And here we have a prophet who was called to go and preach condemnation to these people. Jonah's first response was fear; this is the nation that has enough power to destroy God's people. Why would I willingly go there and preach a word that they will not want to hear? What will this mighty city do to one man? But after time in the belly of the big fish, he decided that he would go. At least, he might see his enemy viciously destroyed by the one true God. Instead, the people listened and God showed compassion on Israel's worst enemy. No wonder Jonah was angry. Wouldn't we be angry? Where is the justice in this? God's compassion can irritate us as God extends mercy to those whose sin has damaged us or those we love.

Anger is a strong emotion. One that is often an outward sign of inward turmoil. Anger is our sixth sense for sniffing out what is wrong. However, Eugene Peterson said, "What anger fails to do... is tell us whether the wrong is outside us or inside us. We usually begin by assuming that the wrong is outside us — our spouse or our child or our God has done something wrong, and we are angry. That is what Jonah did, and he quarreled with God. But when we track the anger carefully, we often find it leads to a wrong within us — wrong information, inadequate understanding, underdeveloped heart."<sup>1</sup>

Divine compassion is at times a mystery and one that can infuriate and confuse us. We as Christians cannot ignore the cry for justice, but as Abraham Heschel says, "beyond justice and anger lies the mystery of compassion." For Brethren historically, leaving space for this divine mystery was very important, leading Brethren to avoid taking up the sword at all costs. It also led Brethren to extend hospitality and service to other nations, no matter their culture or religion. However, it is the church's constant purpose to find room to both answer the call for justice while still leaving space for God's divine compassion. It is a difficult and uneasy dance and one that must always be intentionally and thoughtfully practiced.

This may seem like an odd text for the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Jonah is far from thankful in this book. We do have a prayer of thanksgiving in chapter 2, but this doesn't seem to change Jonah's heart. Jonah thanks God for being the one who can offer deliverance, but Jonah doesn't act like someone who believes that deliverance belongs to the Lord. Jonah is delivered from the belly of the fish, but according to Jonah, God is not allowed to deliver Jonah's enemy. How many times have we been like Jonah - scoffing at the goodness of God, especially when the blessing comes for our enemies? Do we, like Jonah, praise God for our own blessings, but curse

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<sup>1</sup> "Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness" by Eugene Peterson

God for the blessings of another? Do we, like Jonah, care for something like a plant, but care little for people?

One thing we can be thankful for is that even a prophet of the Lord like Jonah, who is supposed to be the mouthpiece of God, can so royally mess up, but still be a child of God. Jonah is able to talk uninhibitedly with God and through Jonah, God is able to call a whole city to repentance. Martin Luther once insisted that "God permits his children to blunder and err greatly and grossly." God gives Jonah a chance, and then a second chance to answer the call to preach to Nineveh. God gives Jonah chance after chance to understand the character of God.

God is a God who forgives, who extends mercy, who pardons. This made me think of the presidential Thanksgiving tradition of pardoning a turkey. Some say that Abraham Lincoln was the first President to grant a White House turkey a reprieve because his son Tad had taken a liking to the bird. If a young child can take a liking to a turkey, how much more does God take a liking to those whom he created. Can we truly blame God for wanting to extend mercy to all his creation, even ones that are so lost that they don't know their right from their left?

Maybe this is the challenge that the story of Jonah offers as we think about it in the context of Thanksgiving. How do we learn to be thankful for both God's justice and God's mercy, especially when it doesn't seem to fit our own standards? Can we truly be thankful when we are the recipients of God's reproach, calling us to leave space for the divine mystery of compassion? We are all like Jonah at times, limited in our understanding of who God is and can be. Luckily, God isn't dependent on our perspective. God is allowed to be much, much bigger. And for that, we must be thankful! For as Jonah said, even though he said it with resentment: the Lord "is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Praise be to God, Amen.