

Sermon: A Sultry East Wind

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16**

God prepared a **sultry east wind**, a dry, scorching wind from God, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah. Poor old Jonah. All kinds of stuff happens to him in this short book about mercy and justice, a book which ends abruptly with Jonah feeling angry and God asking probing questions. Jonah spends most of his time running from God, who always finds him no matter where he hides. The book as a whole is a kind of satire but it raises a host of issues for us, some of which we've been talking about in the last few weeks.

To understand at least part of Jonah's reaction to God's call, it might help to know something about Assyria and Nineveh, which was once the largest city in the world. Assyria's rise and fall is a complicated story for another day. But the prophet Nahum delivered an oracle about Nineveh when Nineveh was still *Nineveh*, prior to its fall in 612 BCE.

His account reflects how the people in the region felt about this fierce and ferocious neighbor. He calls Nineveh, the capital, that 'city of bloodshed,' 'utterly deceitful,' home to 'countless debaucheries,' and so on (Nahum 3). It's not a nice place to visit unless you like that sort of thing. As far as any non-Assyrian was concerned, Assyria's defeat is the Lord's judgement against a cruel oppressor.

So when God calls Jonah to 'go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it,' he heads in the opposite direction. Long story short, Jonah ends up in the belly of a large fish, for three days. And from within the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed to God, saying, 'I with the voice of thanksgiving

will sacrifice to you;

what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the Lord!'

Now Jonah is ready to go and proclaim to Nineveh what God tells him.

There's one problem here: the book of Jonah was written toward the end of or even *after* the Babylonian Exile, in the early 500s, about one hundred years after the historical Nineveh had been destroyed and never rebuilt. Why, then, would the author use Nineveh as an example of repentance? The first hearers of the story might have known that God may have spared Nineveh once but the city is gone now. What happened? Was Jonah's prophecy true or not?

'Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown,' is what he said. The passive-voice Hebrew word for *overthrown* is one way of saying 'turned over' or 'turned around,' which in turn can mean *repent*. Suddenly, Jonah finds himself in the midst of an enemy city full of non-Israelites praising God and repenting of their many sins. We assume this angered Jonah because, in his eyes, his proclamation didn't come true, making him a false prophet. His expectations were not met.

When the Lord asked him, 'Are you that deeply grieved?' Jonah just walked away to see what would happen next.

Meanwhile, in Matthew's parable about the kingdom of heaven, a landowner went out five times and found idle workers standing around each time. The first group agreed to work for the usual day's wage since they would be working the usual number of hours; the others all assumed that their pay would be pro-rated based on the actual number of hours they worked.

In each case, with Jonah and again in the vineyard, there was grumbling and ingratitude at the end of the day. Jonah and the workers hired first failed to see God's grace. To Nineveh and to *all* the workers hired that day, God showed mercy and generosity.

God is free to change. Jonah's story shows us that God is a thoughtful, deliberate YHWH. God's anger isn't forever. God didn't destroy Nineveh; Babylon did. God will pay whatever wages God wants to pay.

Would Jonah be more concerned if Nineveh had been a nice place to visit? His story raises the question of who is most deserving of God's grace. For Jonah, it was easy to distinguish one group, his own, from another, less-deserving group, the Assyrians. But we are all the same to God, equally capable of sin and equally capable of repentance.

Thomas Long is the Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. He recently wrote about today's parable through the experience of the Border Farmworkers Center in El Paso, Texas.¹

New Mexico is right over the border and in New Mexico, they grow peppers of all kinds, both hot and sweet, and lots of them. During the harvest, the farms send buses to the Center to find men to work in the fields.

The history of farm labor in El Paso has often been violent, the work dangerous, and compensation slight. Mexican-American workers and their families have long been considered the *invisible people*.

When the buses arrive, the overseers choose the youngest, strongest, most able-bodied workers first, leaving the rest behind, possibly to be chosen later if more workers are needed. Those chosen will work a long, hot day, usually at less than minimum wage with no overtime pay or other benefits. Things are better today: thirty years ago, before there was a Center or anything like farmworker rights, the overseers would drive down the street and choose from the people they found along the way.

In the parable, the landowner's motive is based on the needs of the workers. In our world, Long writes, 'the economy revolves around the need of the bosses,' not the need of the workers. In the parable, the first workers hired feel they can negotiate their wage to make sure they will be fairly paid. That negotiation disappears as the day goes on, as the later workers become more desperate to earn anything at all. They end up trusting the landowner to treat them justly. In our world, that kind of confidence is usually misplaced.

Finally, when everyone gets paid according to the generosity of the landowner, and not according to the economics of the situation, we begin to see that generosity flows from God. After we see that, it's hard for us to see things in any other way. As Clarence Jordan of Koinonia Farms once said, 'Whenever Jesus told a parable, he lit a stick of dynamite and covered it with a story.'

Long writes that, 'Any company that paid people who work one hour a day the same as it paid full-time workers would soon have a hard time finding employees willing to show up at nine.' We all understand that, I think. Matthew's parable is not meant to be a blueprint for labor practices or economics. The parable enables us to inhabit a world

that operates on generosity rather than greed, ambition, and competition. It enables us to experience a world in which those who stand ignored, idle, and discarded by society are nevertheless of great value to God – worthy, regardless of their circumstances.

Through the book of Jonah, we see that anyone can be redeemed by God’s grace. Jonah’s story ends with him sitting in the sun, speechless, unable to celebrate redemption. But we are left to consider God’s question: ‘Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?’ We are called to turn to God, and in doing that, there is hope for all of us.

Amen.

¹ Thomas Long, ‘Imagining Economic Justice,’ <https://www.onscripture.com/imagining-economic-justice>