

Jonah 1:1-4, 11-12, 15, 17; 2:1,10; 3:1-5,10; 4:1-11  
"When God Goes Fishing"  
Sunday, July 28, 2013

It's easy to look at Jonah's story and think, now this guy's a really problemed person. I mean, how could he think he could run away from God? And who does he think he is, saying God is wrong for showing compassion on certain people? And... who wants to die because their shade's been taken away???

So I wasn't so sure about this Jonah guy... But all that changed when Jonah's story kept coming to mind while on the softball sidelines this week. Watching my girls' softball games- in the league and now in the tournament, has given me many hours of self reflection. Here are some lessons I've learned in light of Jonah's story.

Self Reflection #1: I have noticed that when the other team's pitcher pitches what looks like a strike but the ump calls it a ball, that's ok. We'll take that! But if the tables are turned and our pitcher pitches a strike but the ump calls it a ball... THIS IS NOT GOOD!!! I say to those around me (and maybe loud enough for the ump to hear), "It was right over the plate! Are you kidding me?" And I just might wonder if he's related to a player on the other team.

Self Reflection #2: If Noel or Lily strike out, I'm secretly relieved and maybe even happy when one of our top players on the team strikes out. I think- maybe Noel and Lily won't feel so bad because Frankie struck out too. Kelsie struck out too. Just as long as MY KIDS feel good at the end of the day- that's all that matters.

Self Reflection #3: In my mind certain teams deserve to win and other teams DESERVE to lose. Noel and Lily's teams deserve to win, because... we're nice. And we have good coaches. And we pride ourselves on being fair.

There's this one team that deserves to lose because their coach is abnoxious. He yells at his players. He talks down our players. He intimidates the ump.

All we want is for the coach to be quiet. (And for his team to lose)

But wouldn't you know, this team won first place in Lily's league!

So when it came time to play this team in the tournament, you can bet we were gonna fight it out.

WE HAD TO WIN! WE HAD TO SHOW THEM! And we did. Lily's team beat Chuck's girls 15-11. And it felt really good.

Yes, in my mind certain teams just deserve to win. And I'm really good at deciding which teams those should be. (Usually it's the team with my daughter on it) And I'm good at deciding who should lose. (again, any team of which my daughter is not a part and/or they have a loud obnoxious coach)

Am I the only one who thinks this way? Are these thoughts only something that goes on in MY head or do you sometimes find your thoughts going in the same direction?

What we learn from Jonah's story is that God plays by a whole different set of rules. Rules that are not fair or reasonable. They aren't based on how well the players play or how much they deserve to win!

In fact, once we get in touch with the historical context of which Jonah was a part, we might

agree with Jonah that at times God's rules are JUST PLAIN WRONG.

Jonah knew God's plan involved the possibility that God would show mercy on the Ninevites. And in Jonah's mind there was only thing the Ninevites deserved: utter destruction. Complete annihilation. The end. Sianara. No grace. No mercy. EVER. End of story. (think of who might fit in this category for you. Are there people you have decided SHOULD NOT receive God's mercy? The Cleveland kidnapper perhaps?...)

Jonah wasn't the only one who believed this way about the Ninevites. Every Israelite would've had similar thoughts about the Ninevites. Listen to what the Working Preacher Commentary says about them.

*“Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrians, Israel’s traditional enemy and eventual conqueror. With a population of 120,000 people, some classical accounts say it was the largest city in the world in its day. The text says that its pagan sinfulness was legendary, as was its cruelty: “It was the people which scorched its enemies alive to decorate its walls and pyramids with their skin.” Jonah did not want to see these evil oppressors and cruel tyrants repent, so he fled.”*

God's call upon Jonah to preach to the Ninevites was like an African American being called to preach to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1960s. It was like a Jew being called to preach to Nazis in the 1940s or Palestinians today.

Not only did Jonah fear the Ninevites, HE HATED THEM. They caused his people great tragedy and suffering.

But Jonah's reluctance involved more than just not wanting to preach to his enemies. Did you catch that first line, “Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrians, Israel's traditional enemy AND EVENTUAL CONQUEROR.”

In 722, maybe 50 years after Jonah preached to Nineveh, the northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians, and for much of the next century Judah and Jerusalem were taken captive and ruled by Assyria. (All this was prophesied in The book of Nahum). Jonah of course didn't know this, but he knew it could happen at any time, AND IT DID!  
So God's mercy upon Nineveh came at a tremendous cost for Jonah and for all of Israel.

Why not obliterate them?!!! Jonah, thought. WHY ALLOW THEM TO LIVE TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY?!!! And don't we wonder the same? These guys are the BAD GUYS, the ones with the loud abnoxious coach. The ones we'd never want to win or thrive or be given a second chance...! What is God up to here??? And WHY???

I don't know if you've ever had these kinds of questions for God. Over the weekend a beloved High School student from CV drowned and the Spokesman article went on and on about what a great kid he was. Always smiling, always encouraging, he was working at a camp for underprivileged kids at the time and we go... WHY? There are mass murderers in perfect health... but the honorable people drown swimming across the Spokane River. Why???

When I read the book of Jonah I picture Jesus taking hold of our shoulders, looking at us straight in the eye and saying, “God's mercy isn't just for good people, and his mercy isn't just for bad people. God's mercy is for Jonah and it's for Ninevites even the animals! And for us, the reader, as we try to make sense of a God who pulls out all the stops—inflicting storms,

sending huge swallowing fish, giving us 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> (so many!) chances, just so we'd know and follow the Lord who loves us!

We need to get in touch with God's heart which echoes over and over again in scripture: EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."

This is the uncompromising, unrelenting heart of God. He wants ALL OF US, the whole world! To be saved.

But let's get back to our rules, the rules we sort of want God to have.

DO YOU SEE THE HUGE IRONY in the story, that if we're going to play by our rules, like the rules I have for softball, that some people deserve to win and some deserve to lose, just who would be the winners and losers in Jonah's story based on the characters' actions?

Just for fun, let's look at that. If we're going to have a GOOD and BAD scale, who lies on the "good" side and who lies on the "bad" side? You'd think Jonah would be a winner because he's the Israelite, he's the prophet God chose.

BUT WHO'S THE ONE WHO TRIED TO RUN AWAY FROM God in the very beginning?

Who had to be THROWN INTO THE SEA TO CALM THE STORM?

Who did God SEND THE FISH TO SWALLOW just to teach him a lesson?

Who, even after 3 days and 3 nights in that fish and a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance NEVER REPENTED BUT CONTINUED TO BE ANGRY AT GOD FOR THE MERCY GOD SHOWED THE NINEVITES?

Meanwhile, the people we never expect, those barbaric, violent, pagan Ninevites, REPENTED immediately when they heard God's message! They didn't need a storm or a fish to swallow them. They didn't need a second chance. Listen to their response after they hear Jonah say, REPENT!!! (vs. 3:7-9)

If you go with a "good people" / "bad people" scale, with some people deserving God's mercy and others not, the Ninevites win and Jonah loses.

Praise God there's not a scale. Or if there is one, we're all at the very bottom. We're all LOST. We're all BROKEN. We're all pointing the finger at the other guy, saying, "You're all lost, but I have found you. You're all sinners, but I have redeemed you."

There's so much we could reflect upon about Jonah and his thoughts and actions. But I just want to leave you with this:

It's time we start SEEING people the way God sees them.

It's time we start TREATING PEOPLE the way God TREATS them.

It's time we start SHOWING MERCY to those whom God SHOWS MERCY.

Seeing people the way God sees them involves recognizing that we're all in the same boat. We are all selfish. We think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. We are hopeless creatures but for God's hand of mercy and grace upon our lives.

I want to go back to the softball field for a moment.

After the game Lily and I walked to the car with friends of ours from church. I leaned over to George and said, "The coach for the other team is something else, isn't he?!"

And George said, "Yes, he gets quite passionate, doesn't he."

Passionate!!! I had some other words to describe that coach, but none of which was PASSIONATE!”

George said, “Yea, after coaching both my boys in baseball I know how it is to be passionate about winning. I know what it’s like to get carried away and say things you don’t mean to be saying. You don’t always realize the way you come across. Yes, that coach was “passionate.”

Hmmmm, I thought. Passionate.

Then I told my neighbor about Lily’s team winning the tournament and just had to add a word about the other team’s coach... Kristen said, “Nancy, I used to be like that coach.” What? You too, Kristen?

And Kristen went on to tell me how she used to yell all these things to her son Jacob while he played soccer. “Comments like, “What was that, Jacob?!” “Kick it harder!” “Run faster!” “Do this! Do that!... And have I ever played soccer in my life???”

Her son told her, “mom, can you stop shouting to me on the sidelines?” But Kristen told him she wasn’t shouting, she was only helping...

“What made you change?”, I asked. She said she finally woke up to what she was doing when she took a videotape of a game and heard this crazy person yelling obnoxiously in the background. “Who’s that...?”, she thought. And realized it was HERSELF!!!

Tears flooded her eyes. She ran to Jacob to say sorry. She even went to counseling for it! She had no idea....

That videotape was like a mirror in Kristen’s face, calling her to REPENT! To turn around, change her ways and go a different way. God’s call for Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninevites wasn’t just a message for them, it was a message for Jonah as well. How he needed and HOW WE NEED a wake up call to help us see the extent of our sin so that we might repent and cling to God. – Not pointing the finger at anyone else, but receiving God’s mercy first hand so we can generously give it away to others.

May we get on our knees. May we bow our hearts and minds before the Lord, asking God to forgive us, change us, renew us and help us see others the way Jesus sees, loves and saves them. Amen. Who did God SEND THE FISH TO SWALLOW just to teach him a lesson?

In order for us to get a grip on how scandalous Jonah perceived God's actions, we must understand something about the Ninevites in the course of Israel's history. Nineveh was

