

Jonah 4:1-4

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[0:00] But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, Do you do well to be angry?

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Listen to the words of Frederick Buechner on the subject of anger.

He writes, Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontation still to come.

[1:21] To savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back. In many ways, it is a feast fit for a king.

The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you. So the words of Frederick Buechner.

Our text today is bookended, if you'll take a look, on either side with the word anger.

Jonah's anger put forward in verse 1. God's question concerning that anger on the back side in verse 4.

And so the emphasis of the brief reading today is encapsulated right there. Jonah's condition, 1 to 3.

[2:37] God's question, verse 4. It doesn't take long, does it, to see that Jonah is in a really bad way and that anger is involved.

And any time anger is involved, something is amiss. I'm speaking in a qualified sense of unrighteous anger.

But here it is in the text. I suppose if we had Jonah here today, he might tell us that he didn't really know how long it took him to get into this leading characteristic that governs his life.

And I'm sure he would tell us he didn't know how to get out of it. He's a man in need of a restart.

Lest he become bitter as he ages. Many of you perhaps are too young to recall the days of pinball machines.

[3:53] But for the three or four of us here who remember playing them, in the old world of pinball, Jonah's gone full tilt.

The lights are blinking, the sirens are sounding, he's gone off, he's cut loose, he's lost it. In contemporary language, he needs an intervention of sorts.

I suppose the younger generation would say, when can we enroll him in a class on anger management? The textual indicator early is there that reveals his condition.

His anger, right there in verse 1 it reads, but it displeased Jonah exceedingly. If you were to translate it, connecting it to the actual Hebrew language of the preceding text, you would see the immediate parallel for in 3.10, God saw how they had turned from their evil, and so God relents from the evil that He would do to them.

Chapter 4, verse 1, but Jonah was exceedingly convinced that what God was doing was evil. That's a pretty clear indicator that he needs a restart.

[5:34] He's lost the ability to distinguish between good and evil. The Ninevites were doing evil things.

Jonah now feels that God's mercy toward them would be evil. Notice, his dissatisfaction with God isn't over God's justice. It isn't that, I've heard somewhere that you hold everybody accountable. And I don't like that kind of a world. No, his dissatisfaction with God, ironically, is over God's mercy. God, your mercy upon that people is an evil thing.

It says he was angry. Literally, he was hot.

I suppose, in some sense, we talk about somebody who's hot-headed. He's boiling. The old cartoon characters steam from the ears. He's hot toward God.

[6:44] He's lashing out against him. Interestingly, for those of us who are reading this, it's just, we'd like to pull him aside.

Interesting, Jonah. Maybe a little look in the mirror. Shouldn't you be angry with yourself?

Is there a bit of displacement going on here? Henry Farley, in his book, *Seven Deadly Sins*, writes, but consider the student whose professor has given him an F for an incompetent performance.

The student will not be angry at himself. The idea that his own slovenliness is to blame if it enters his mind at all will at once be dismissed. He will be angry at his professor.

Jonah, his own interior world is so warped at this moment that he can't even distinguish between good and evil or that mercy on anyone is a good thing from the hand of God.

[7:58] But rather than look himself in the mirror, he projects it all upon God. You know, we live together in pastoral ministry now over 26 years.

This is part and parcel of the human condition. We all fall prey to this. Angry at others, not realizing that we've deceived ourselves in some behavior.

We're incapable of looking internally and discovering that the issue very well may be with us. So, notice, the text shows that Jonah's dissatisfaction with God worked upon his mind and his soul in two ways.

Because he was dissatisfied with God, he becomes anger, angry. And it's also the source of his despairing of life. Look at verse 3.

Please take my life from me. Anger and despair join together in a strange way as the consequences of someone whose soul is dissatisfied with God.

[9:21] We'll pick up the despair next week because I think 5 through the end covers that more clearly. But where does this kind of anger toward God come from?

What is the source of Jonah's outburst? I want to speak to it generally because it's part of the human condition. Your dissatisfaction with God or with others, anger when it emerges and erupts in a moment without a fuse even needing to be lit, is the consequence of a divided heart.

In other words, it's important to know that the source of anger is internal, not external. It's not those things out there.

There's something off-kilter in here. We're mistaken to think that external things are always the root cause of anger.

It's not the case. anger. Listen to St. Augustine on anger. This, for me, is the clearest understanding of finding the root cause of anger.

[10:36] He writes, According to my way of thinking, anger is the turbulent urge to overcome those obstacles which hinder our freedom of action.

Therefore, we are often angry not only at people, but at a pen in writing, so that we slash it and break it, or painters with their brushes, or anyone with any kind of implement from which he thinks he suffers frustration.

And so it was with Jonah. God was, in a sense, frustrating him, and that turbulent urge within to overcome an obstacle that would hinder his own freedom of action.

That's the way it is with all of us. The source of our dissatisfaction with God and the outbursts of anger is rooted in a heart that is divided and frustrated because we cannot have our way.

for Jonah, more than generally, in Jonah's case, the internal satisfaction stemmed from what he already knew about the character of God.

[11:54] look at verse 2, and he prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and

merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from evil.

Jonah's dissatisfaction with God stemmed from what he knew about God. that phrase which Pastor Jackson opened the service on today and which has actually appeared in our music in the liturgy, that phrase about a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, that phrase has a history in Israel's past.

It doesn't just appear here in the book of Jonah for the first time in the sacred writings. As the reading came forward in the midst of the liturgy in Exodus 34, God passed by Moses and God said, I am gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love.

And the context of God disclosing himself in this way was on the backside of the golden calf incident in Exodus 33. And the rupturing anger that came forth with Moses and he actually broke the tablets in an outburst of his anger and God says, now for the next load of tablets, you've got to cut your own stone and get up here and I'm going to tell you who I am.

In the midst of a people who have gone after a golden calf, life, and in midst of the great prophet who couldn't understand what was going on, God discloses himself simply in this way, I am the God of restarts.

[14:01] it comes again in numbers, 14, 12 men into the promised land to spy it out, 10 bring back a bad report, again the people in a sinful condition, and Moses looks to God and God said, why would I go forward with this people again?

And Moses says, don't you remember Exodus 34? You are gracious and merciful, and if you're not going with me, then we shouldn't go at all.

And God affirms through this phrase, I am a God of new beginnings. I will walk with you. after your rebellion, as a consequence of your repentance, and we will get on with our walk to the promised land.

That history is important because it demonstrates that within the biblical record, this phrase about God's gracious ways is in every instance used as the antidote to our own internal fallen condition.

[15:34] It's a phrase, it's a reminder for everyone here today who personally needs a new beginning. for people who are here today who feel, I don't know how I got to this condition, and I certainly don't know how to get out, and I'm entrenched, and I've become a person.

That's very similar to Jonah. Jonah, I've lost my distinguishing ability to even know what's right or wrong. I'm lashing out in every direction, and I say to you today, God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Jonah was well aware that the character of God had been demonstrated toward Israel in its past in ways that would be kind, and he knew that it would be the same for the Assyrians because God is not partial.

It is, in a very clear way, our understanding today. In the case of the prophet Jonah, a good case can be made that his anger is the fulfillment of God's prophetic word against Israel.

In other words, that God is actually using his anger as the means by which he's trying to get his attention. It was predicted in Moses, by Moses, in Deuteronomy 32, in which he called the heaven and earth to witness his word, a prediction that although God had found Israel and that God had been gracious toward her, that nevertheless Israel would grow fat and provoke God to anger and forget that God had given them birth and as a result he says, you have made me jealous and angry with idols and gods that are not gods.

[18:07] I will make you jealous and angry by bringing a people to myself who are no people. And that is the fulfillment of what's happening in Jonah. The entire book of Jonah is the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 32, 21.

God is saying to his own covenantal people, I have now brought you to a point where you are undoing yourself and I'm using my mercy upon other people who are now coming in who had no background at all in the promises in hopes that it might lead you to humility and repentance.

let me put it concretely an angry person's anger may be God's way of getting their attention rather than the thing which is going to get his attention.

He may have given you over to becoming the person you are today so that you would hear this word and look for a better way.

The truth of the book of Jonah then is this as we are arriving at chapter 4 we began reading the book sure that Assyria needed God's mercy and that Jonah was the chosen instrument to bring it and now I know so much more.

[19:42] Israel is in need of repentance and Jonah's anger is an indication of God's provocation that she too might by repentance have a rightful share in the mercy of God.

Well what's the best way to address this kind of anger? I mean how do you talk to a man or to a marriage or to a child or to a church or to a city that no longer has control of itself?

How do we talk to individuals whose displeasure with God is now erupting and bursts of anger toward others and the despair of life itself? In other words what do we do with Jonah's condition? Verse 4 God's question and the Lord said do you do well to be angry?

I love the simplicity of verse 4 literally in a sense this do you do well to be hot headed on this one?

[21:19] It's the right question for Jonah it's a good question for all of us so let me say to you if the source of your anger and dissatisfaction with others and with God and with life itself is all around you and swallowed you know this the source is internal and therefore the change will require internal change which is the message of the gospel that we actually make progress from the inside out what's happening to you is not merely the result of things external think of the way James puts it when he says what causes quarrels and what causes fights is it not this that your passions are at war within you what's going on out here is the consequence of what is divided in here which then requires humility and repentance perhaps anger comes as a way of divine warning not necessarily something that you will in the future receive divine judgment perhaps it's already

God's warning bells full tilt gone off that he plans to do some work with you that he's priming you to see his mercy in fresh ways that he's calling you to repentance certainly the apostle Paul used this as the motivational force of his entire gentile ministry feeling that his work amongst the outsiders that God would be merciful to would bring the insiders back to repentance and faith perhaps God has brought you to this point to teach you a better way and I say to you that in the Lord Jesus Christ you see the kindness of God made manifest and in Christ you do well to believe that nobody is beyond his reach least of all you and in

Christ with the strength of his spirit we take on the character of God and learn the way of mercy our heavenly father this book so interestingly placed in the scriptures and I ask Lord that you would help us today to get a fresh picture of your mercy that your love is so amazing that it would even come to us and from that vantage point Lord stir up our souls to live out your very character in Christ's name amen