



JONAH

pursued by grace

WHERE RESENTMENT MEETS MERCY

Sunday 11 September 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

>> *Read Jonah chapter 4.*

It's a real privilege to be with you today, to be invited to finish up our series on the Book of Jonah, from the Old Testament, a book that Keiran laughingly described to me on Friday, after his experience of preaching from it, as 'this small freaky book that gets inside your head and then does your head in a bit.'

Before I launch directly into Jonah chapter 4, I want to share how good it is to be back worshipping as an extended community, what a delight it is to sing together. Sometimes I can't help looking around when we sing, and when I do, sometimes I forget to sing, because I get an ache in my throat, so grateful for the way each of you are the signs of God's love in the world.

One Sunday morning, not so long ago, I noticed a Dad and his young son, standing just over here. This dad was holding on tight to his small boy, holding his son up high in his arms. And this small boy, with his perky black topknot ponytail, was peeking over his dad's shoulder, gazing my way, clutching on tight to his dad's left ear, like that ear was an actual handle.

Ah, that moment. It was so lovely. That chunky boy, with his brown eyes, clutching tight to his dad's ear, like it was the very thing that would keep him safe for all eternity! Or at the very least protect him for the next little while, from the ditzzy woman in the blue denim jacket, with the shiny eyes and the frizzy hair, beaming at him like a crazy lady.

What I loved most about that moment was the startling glimpse it gave me of implicit trust.

The trust that gets borne so powerfully, through the daily patient, invisible work of a Dad who knows how to be with his child in a way that leads to life. Sometimes little moments like these, they feel so restorative to me, like drops of Lucy's medicinal cordial in Narnia. Sometimes these moments can move my heart just as radically as any sermon.

This little moment in church reminded me of another moment though, one that happened in September, a few years back, in a café in Oatley. There I witnessed another dad holding on tight to his newborn. A newborn boy who had the most astounding luxurious brown hair I have ever seen, swooped back in a tousled Elvis pompadour.

Everything about the way this dad held his baby told me he was a newborn dad too. You could see it in the way he clasped his boy so carefully, like the baby was a priceless ancient ceramic vase, released from the vault of the British museum. You could see it in the bruised welts beneath his eyes, how this dad was more whacked out and sleep deprived than he could ever have imagined, whilst simultaneously never more alive, more alive to the sheer wild joy of the world, but also suddenly never more alive to the dangers too.

That newborn dad jiggled his baby boy, up and down, up and down, and then he smoothed one hand over that baby's head, over that luxurious spiky pompadour. He ran his large hand over that small head like a warm peach, over and over again, in the sunshine. And something about that gesture - the gentle hypnotic tenderness of it - set off a physical yearning in me. Because what would it be like to be loved like that, to be held with such transparent delight, right from the very beginning?

When you see a moment like this, you can't help but want to soak them up, to soak them up as a counterbalance to the other moments that come our way too, the bruising small moments and the big brutalising ones, those moments that we all experience, at one time or another.

Just the other day, Keiran and I were driving into the city, whizzing down Stony Creek Road, past Pet O, when a fancy-pancy car in the left lane drifted suddenly into our lane. Keiran gave that car a short sharp beep, just to let the driver know that we were in his blind spot. And just then that very same driver honked back at us, with prolonged vigour and energy. Beeeep! Beeeeeeep! Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep! And at that sound, our fifteen-year old son lurched up out of his teenage reverie and leant forward, asking with great seriousness, 'Is he beeping out his thanks to us?'

To which Keiran and I both laughed and laughed, both because of the unguarded innocence of that question, but also because of the bittersweetness of it, until one of us finally had the breath to say, 'No, mate, he's honking back, because he's really angry with us, angry in a sort of annoyed don't you tell me what to do kind of way.' Our boy fell back

in astonishment. 'But shouldn't he be thanking you?' he asked, gazing out of his window. 'I mean our car is bigger than his. If he whacked into our car, it could really damage his car. And his car's expensive.' To which Keiran replied, 'Yes...well, maybe that's how it'll go in heaven, we'll gently toot each other in warning while we're driving and other people will beep back their profound thanks... But meanwhile on earth, often it's honking all the way.'

After that incident, for the next couple of weeks, whenever Keiran or I offered each other any kind of mild correction and one of us arced up about it, the other would turn and say, 'Are you honking back at me?'

Which brings me to the Book of Jonah, and the start of Chapter Four, which begins with Jonah actually giving God a massive honk on the dusty streets of Nineveh.

But before we get to Jonah's outburst against God, let's talk about Jonah's prophetic message. Because after much ingenuity on God's behalf, Jonah finally delivers God's word to Nineveh. Although Jonah might have given that word, *'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,'* with all the finesse of a delivery driver of the St George & Sutherland Shire Leader, it still made a colossal impact.

Maybe it was the tone of the delivery, or maybe it was his appearance; Jonah, walking the streets, still stinking vaguely of fish guts, taking his very life into his hands, in all vulnerability, to bring a message of warning to the people that are his sworn enemies.

Before long Jonah's message spreads like a wildfire, from the edge of the city, right to the centre and despite it being a polytheistic city, as Bruce mentioned a few weeks ago, the Ninevites embrace Jonah's God, believing and trusting Him. And all kinds of things get overthrown straightaway, but not in the way that Jonah expects. Before too long, the King of Nineveh is sliding off his throne, sitting repentant in the ashes. Everyone is wearing sackcloth and fasting (including the animals). Everyone is crying out mightily to God for mercy. And just like that, the King of Nineveh decrees that the whole city must turn from their evil and their violence.

'Who knows?' says the King of Nineveh. 'God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.' (Jonah 3:9)

What a-do-your-head-in moment this is for us! Jonah, standing on the edge of the city, knowing with certainty what the King of Nineveh knows only as a hunch: that God is utterly gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love. And what a-do-your-head-in moment for Jonah, when God changes His mind and relents from bringing calamity on the Ninevites!

It's an astonishing turn of events. The moment where God's truth and grace meet in a violent city, and mercy gushes up like a well of water. It's the moment where a ramshackle

street becomes a neighbourhood, house by house; a community, street by street. The moment where a violent city begins to become a shining signpost, in a brutal nation. This moment where God's beautiful dream for humanity comes luminously true, in a place that was never expected.

But for Jonah, this is not a moment for rejoicing. In fact, it's the very moment that he most feared. Because even though Jonah has confessed in the belly of the fish that he believes that deliverance belongs to the Lord, he sure as heck doesn't believe it belongs to Nineveh.

And just like that, we're back at the beginning of chapter 4, where Jonah, witnessing the widespread repentance of the city and God's relenting, gives God a bitter roasting:

'God! I knew it!' Jonah prays. 'I knew it - when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat, to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness! So, God, if you won't kill them, kill me, I'm better off dead!'
(Jonah 4:1-2 - The Message)

It's a histrionic yowl of rage and, simultaneously, one of the most sincere and frank prayers that Jonah utters. And maybe it's helpful that bottled-up prayer has come spewing up. Because how else can God deal with Jonah's white-hot resentment, unless Jonah can actually see it, hear it, and confess it, and bring it before the mercy of God? How else can Jonah come to terms with the mercy of God, unless he is willing to face, at least for a little while, the dark reality of his own vengeful self?

And so God kicks off an uncomfortable family conversation, with a tenderly searing question.

'Is it right for you to be angry?' he asks Jonah. (Jonah 4:4 - NRSV)

It's such a searching question.

Is it right for Jonah to be angry? After all, God is the Creator of the Universe and He can do whatever He wants! And hasn't God already shown incredible mercy to Jonah? Hasn't God delivered Jonah with grace and ingenuity, time and time again?

Is it right for Jonah to be angry? Well, on the other hand, the Assyrians have been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents. Is it right that God should send Israel into exile at the hands of the Assyrians, only to let the Assyrians off the hook?

God's question to Jonah is the sort of question that could do-your-head-in... Because it's

got the capacity to fan up other questions. I mean when is someone's repentance, even if it is truly genuine, enough to erase generations of violence? When is mercy, in the face of repentance, just?

Jonah doesn't even bother answering God's question. But it's interesting to ponder the text. In the Hebrew, the word that is translated as 'anger' means 'to burn.' So God is actually asking Jonah here: 'Is it right for you to burn with anger?'

The image is one of destruction, to 'burn up' or 'consume.' Now, we know that anger as an emotion can often be a healthy response, it can be love in motion: the emotion that energises us to take action when we see injustice, or when boundaries are being transgressed in harmful ways. 'Righteous anger,' says Desmond Tutu, 'is often about the one whom we see being harmed and want to help.' Anger on these occasions can lead to life; to courage, to love, to compassion, to change and transformation. Which is what see breaking out in the streets of Nineveh, at least for a time, after Jonah delivers God's message.

But we also know, even from just a casual glance across the daily news, that human anger needs careful stewarding. It needs proper processing. Anger needs to be wrestled with because anger suppressed and repressed can 'burn' the one who contains it, and anger expressed inappropriately can 'burn' others.

All of which is to say: no wonder God asks Jonah to consider his anger. To explore it. To test it in the way a dentist might probe a loose pocket of gum near a healthy-looking tooth, to make sure there's not some sort of raging abscess at the root of it.

But Jonah's having none of it. Because he's already been taken too far out on the tide of his rage and so he withdraws again into steely silence, back to stonewalling God, holding up a metaphorical hand in God's face.

And so Jonah stomps outside of the city, on the run once more, but to the east now instead of the west, and he whacks up a shelter or a booth. Now, I know this is not right theologically, but I like to imagine this shelter as a pop-up beach tent, only because I know how hilariously frustrating those things can be to erect, how they can send even the sanest person apoplectic in a few short minutes. Once Jonah's finished slapping his shelter together, he sits under it, brooding and sulky in the shade, a stark contrast to the penitent way the King of Nineveh is sitting on the ground in ashes, just kilometres away, back in the centre of the city.

Here's another do-your-head-in moment, because a part of me can't help wondering: what might life have been like in Nineveh, if Jonah had stayed? What if he had hung back and kept on preaching and teaching, helping the people make sense of their massive city-

wide repentance, sharing all that he knew for certain about God?

But Jonah stays outside the city, smouldering, waiting to see what would become of it. Perhaps Jonah is checking to see whether the Ninevites will take up their moment of grace and make something permanent of it. But it's also possible that it's something else: that Jonah is trying to force God's hand here. Because hasn't Jonah already made it clear to God: it's either me or them. My death or theirs. Isn't Jonah waiting for God to change His mind? To bring calamity. Isn't Jonah hoping for final externalisation of his inward state; the burning of the city?

Now, if Jonah's careless disregard for the safety of those generous mariners on that ship to Tarshish is hard to swallow, this moment feels a hundred times worse. Because how can Jonah sit there so hard-heartedly, when he's walked some of the city streets, he's heard some of the wails of repentance; perhaps even caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of a curly-haired man sitting bowed in the dust, with a shiny brown-eyed toddler perched on his dad's shoulder, clinging tight to his dad's left ear.

There's a part of me that feels terribly sad for Jonah here, sitting outside of the city. Sad that Jonah, who is so fixated on NOT becoming the means of grace to the impossible people he despises, might somehow miss out on the impossible people that might turn out to be a means of grace to him.

But although there is something so bittersweet about this last chapter, there is something so astonishingly beautiful about it too. Because it's in this last section that we encounter the heart of God. It's here we encounter His long-suffering patience. It's here we see God's hilarious, perceptive tenderness on full display.

Because even though Jonah has been up to his neck in the quicksand of his own resentment; God has never given up on Jonah. Not once. Not in Joppa. Not on the ship to Tarshish. Not in the sea. Not in the belly of the big fish. Not in Nineveh. And not now, outside the city...

And now, because God knows that Jonah is lost to all reason, God approaches Jonah from another new angle. He sends Jonah a vine. A fast-growing vine that sprouts up, bright and leafy green, unfurling right over Jonah's head. And this large, leafy, velvety vine brings shade and beauty to Jonah. It brings him comfort and pleasure. Jonah is overjoyed by its growth, by the surprise of it, by the grace of it; and he's content to sit there, in its shade. And it's the first and only time in the whole book that Jonah is described as being happy.

He's a happy chappy at last.

But then dawn comes the next morning, and God appoints a worm to attack the great

vine. And the worm goes at it, with all of the ferocity of the hungry caterpillar on steroids. And before too long the vine is a withered stumpy mess. But God's not finished yet, so He dials up the intensity even further. He sends a sultry wind to blow from the east and tweaks the sun to beat down fiercely and before too long Jonah is sweating, burning in the heat, angry to the point of death.

And God asks Jonah another question, more pointed this time, *'Is it right for you to be angry at this vine?'*

And Jonah replies, quick as a whip, 'Too right it is! Angry enough to DIE.' It's a melodramatic moment and in many ways it reminds me of one of my boys who, when he was a toddler and had his will suddenly thwarted, would scrunch up his face in the middle of a supermarket, his eyes filled with angry tears, shouting, 'I DIE. I DIE!'

But at least Jonah's back to talking with God again, which is always a win. And so God says to Jonah:

'You are concerned about the vine, for which you didn't labour and which you didn't grow, it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And shouldn't I be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are 120,000 people, who do not know their right hand from their left hand, and also many animals?' (Jonah 4:10-11 - NRSV)

You know, a story is like a bridge: an invitation from the heart of one person to another, to grasp heart, mind, body soul - what it means to live like them. And in all kinds of ways, this vine feels like a bridge too, an appeal for understanding. It's a live-action parable. An invitation from God to Jonah, for Jonah to grasp what it means for God to be truly concerned for all of creation, what it means for God to love each person in it, with the transparent delight of a newborn father, awake from the very beginning to the sheer wild joy of loving all of humanity and also the terrible dangers too.

Shouldn't I be concerned, Jonah?

Shouldn't I be concerned?

And so the book ends plaintively, on this question from God to Jonah, on a question that Jonah never answers. It feels a little bit abrupt, like the book might not yet be finished. But maybe that's the way God intended it to be, so the question to Jonah could come ricocheting down the ages, for our ears too.

Maybe God leaves it that way, out of respect too, for the questions Jonah raises about the mysterious tension between God's judgement and mercy, and the sometimes terrible pain of how to make sense of it all. Those questions that continue to linger down the years

without a clear-cut answer, right up until that moment, one cold starry night, when a baby boy was born to Mary and Joseph in a stable in Bethlehem.

But back to Jonah, because just as the book might do our heads in, if we're honest, there are so many places we might recognise ourselves in it too.

Which brings me to the insane time I almost got my head punched in, in the carpark at the Kingswood Campus of Western Sydney Uni, back when I was twenty-three. I was in my third year of training to be an actor and completely surprised to also find myself in the middle of a huge spiritual awakening. I could often be found sneaking into the office of the Anglican Chaplain on campus, to talk about Jesus, glancing over my shoulder, hoping none of my acting friends might catch me.

But in that office, I was beginning to grasp the depths of the story. I was beginning to get to know Jesus. The One born in the manger. The One called Emmanuel, God with us. The One who lived in obscurity for nearly thirty years before starting His ministry. The One who listened and healed and loved creation. The One who told strangely good stories, who ate and drank freely and in some people's eyes was too tipsily joyful. The One hanging out with all the wrong sorts of people. I was beginning to get to know Jesus and even to love Him a little, even though I still felt uncertain about the wisdom of surrendering my whole life to Him.

One day, around this time, I was running late for class, so I was flying down the M4 at the absolute speed limit in a white Ford Laser, stomach churning, when I got stuck behind a car, driving like a snail in the right-hand lane, matching the same speed as the car on the left. I'm sure you know the agony! So I flashed my lights at the car (no honking I might add.) They resisted moving. So I flashed my lights once more and eventually, the car slid left into a gap. When I overtook that car, I paused, just for a millisecond and I gave the female driver 'the look.' Now I think some of you may know what I mean. The little angry eye roll... The disapproving shake of the head... The exasperated sigh of a wounded saint.

But because I was exactly the kind of person that didn't know my right from my left hand, a little further down the freeway, I realised that my petrol gauge was shining empty. Which meant that by the time, I filled up at the petrol station and then pulled back onto the freeway and then finally hit the exit, the girl who I had flashed my lights at was right behind me on the off-ramp, as we all waited for the lights to turn green. Even in my rear vision mirror, I could tell she was a little bit cranky. And as we drove off and she tailed my every move, I realised, with a sense of sinking dread, that perhaps it was more than just a little bit.

When I finally pulled into the University carpark, she swung into the carpark next to mine, and I knew I was in trouble. I hopped out of my car. She hopped out of hers. Then she

launched herself at me, overtaken by some kind of crazy volcanic rage. Not only towards me, which was pretty scary, but also towards the Ford Laser, which just happened to belong to Keiran's mum. After a heated exchange in the carpark, I extricated myself unscathed, shaking both with fear, anger and righteous contempt, with a parting shot to her that I had noted the make of her car and the number plate and that if anything happened to my car in the meantime, I would make a report to security. After some weeks, I never gave her another thought.

Until a couple of months down the track.

Because I finally did decide to surrender my whole life to Jesus, after encountering His far-seeing, straight-up and true kind of tenderness; the way He could behold my beauty and brokenness, my weakness and fragility, and keep on loving, regardless.

Not long after making a decision to follow Jesus, I found myself praying to Him one morning, as I walked from the train station to Uni, across a massive park. I was struck senseless with amazement about how God could take such an unimaginable risk. How Jesus could come so willingly, across space and time, giving up power and majesty, to love and be loved on our terms, placing His life so vulnerably into our hands. As I reflected on the things He endured - the betrayal, the rejection, His suffering, His agonised concern for His enemies, His lonely thirsty death on the cross, the price He paid, taking on all the sins of humanity, the death He died to save the whole world - I was completely undone and I prayed to Him, 'I love You and I will do anything for You.'

They were my words. If I'm honest, I was probably thinking of something noble and heroic, ala Florence Nightingale saving soldiers in the Crimean war. But just then, out of nowhere, that girl in the car rose before my eyes. And I suddenly got this weird tender sense that what Jesus wanted was for me to write that girl a letter of apology, to find her car and to slip that letter beneath her windscreen wiper.

And in that split second, what I said to Jesus in my head was, 'Oh no! You can't be serious! Isn't there anything else? Couldn't I just sell all my possessions and give that to the poor?' I felt instantly resistant, angry and perturbed because, after all, I wasn't the crazy one, was I? But as I plodded closer and closer to University, I eventually gave in and I prayed, saying yes I'd be willing to do it. But even in that moment, I was sneakily fleeing, secretly consoling myself that given the size of the university carpark, there was absolutely no chance that I would ever see that girl's car again. So you can imagine my dismay when I walked up the very first aisle of the car park that morning and there was her car, third spot down, sparkling in the sun. And I knew it was hers because I had noted it down, the type of car, the colour, the licence plate, memorised it, all those months ago.

I could not believe it. But I gritted my teeth and I sat down in the gutter. I tore out some

paper from an exercise book and began to write. And that's when the serious wrestling began. Because what I wanted to write was 'Hey there, I'm extremely sorry for what happened and for the hurt I caused you. I can see it made you feel less than valued. I promise not to do it again - as long as you promise next time, not to be such a road hog.' Clearly, that wasn't going to cut it with the Holy Spirit. So I ended up writing draft after draft after draft, sweating and angry and sick to my stomach, until finally I could give up my priggish self-righteousness and leave a letter on her windscreen that tasted like love.

Because what I didn't get then, but which I understand now, is that I did a real violence to that girl on the freeway. The flashing of my lights. The exasperated look I gave her. All the ways this must have resonated with a toxic chorus of other voices, all of us saying together, 'You are a waste of time and space. Get out of my way.' What God asked me to do was to go back to this girl He loved so much, to make amends, to affirm that she was a person of beauty, of worth, value and dignity, the things I had failed to see and robbed her of, at least for a time, as I sped my way blithely down the freeway.

I don't know what it meant for her to receive that apology. To come back and stand reading that scrap of paper in the carpark. I know I've never written a letter that felt quite so much like dying. But I still remember the feeling after I had slipped the letter beneath the wiper and walked away. The sense of lightness. Like someone had been holding my arms tight against my body and then suddenly set them free.

I look back now with gratitude at this dramatic moment where Jesus first began to teach me that my love for Him would always need to find it's deepest expression in my love for others, particularly those that I might find tricky or be tempted to hate. In so many ways, that small moment of wrestling with my own resentment and my struggle to forgive, for an incident that largely arose out my own dumb stupidity, was good preparation for some other bigger things to come.

There is so much about this life that is a mystery. Sometimes God asks us to do challenging things, and we get swept up in anger and resentment, and disobey and flee, ending up in stormy or dry barren places. Sometimes we get into hard shadowy places through the violence of others. Sometimes we get into shadowy places through our own violence. What are we to do with our anger? Our bitter resentments? What are we to do with those people that feel impossible to love? What are those people to do, who find us impossible? And what are we do to with those things that feel impossible to love within ourselves?

What the Book of Jonah teaches me is that God is to be trusted. That God is merciful beyond all comprehension. That God invites us into authentic relationship, and that He is big enough to hear our biggest feelings, our hardest questions. That God does astonishing things, often when we least expect it. And that God never gives up. There is no end to His creative ingenuity, the desire He has to rescue all of His children from the dominion of

darkness, to call us out into the kingdom of the Son He loves, to come searching for us, no matter how far away we flee.

Let's pray:

Our Father.

We know that you have a beautiful dream for all humanity: that we might be a people that walk in undiluted friendship with You, knowing your transparent delight, each knowing our own beauty, worth, value and dignity. And when humanity fled, embracing our own way, and we ended up in hard and shadowy places, when Your beautiful dream was sideswiped by evil and wickedness, we know that You came searching for us, that Jesus came to us, with His impossible love, to bring us home into His kingdom, that and in and through the Holy Spirit, we might become a people who love and are loved in astonishing ways. Help us to surrender to You to today; that we might become a people, Your dream come true, a community known for impossible mercy, awake always to the impossible mercy You have shown to us.

Oh Jesus, now unto Him who is able to keep us from stumbling. The One who is able to present us before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy. To the only wise God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!

Amen.