

SEPTEMBER 24, 2017  
Jonah 4:1-11  
Matthew 20:1-16  
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In her recent book, Hallelujah Anyway, Anne Lamott recalls a New Yorker cartoon in which one dog is saying to another, “It is not enough that we succeed. Cats must also fail.” It seems a perfect summation of the story of Jonah. It is one of my favorite books in the Bible because of the variety of human emotion and behavior reflected in its narrative. Even though it is placed in with the twelve minor prophets, it’s not really a prophetic text. Its style is narrative and it lacks the extended pronouncements found in most prophetic writings. There is no long discourse about how the community is failing to live up to God’s ideals.

It is unique among the prophets for several reasons. Jonah is not sent to the Israelites. Poor Jonah is sent to the enemy. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire that captured the northern kingdom in the eighth century B.C. They sacked the capital city of Samaria and moved in to stay. The intermingling and intermarriage between the idol-worshipping Assyrians and the Israelites was not a good thing. It resulted in a Jewish community that was seen as corrupted by the values and practices of the Assyrians. And Jonah is not sent to just any enemy. The Assyrians were the beginning of a long line of occupiers. They were eventually displaced by the Babylonians, the destroyers of the first temple. The Babylonians were in turn overthrown by the Persians. Scholars agree that Jonah was probably written during the Persian occupation. So, Jonah carries the memory of occupation and oppression with him. It is unique in that Jonah doesn’t just accept God’s assignment. And because Jonah is successful. He delivers God’s message and it is accepted by the people of Nineveh.

The story begins when God tells Jonah to go to the people of Nineveh to warn them of their impending destruction. But he doesn’t go, he runs. Hosea and Amos and Micah might have followed God’s instructions, but not Jonah. He heads straight for the coast and hires a ship to get as far away as possible. I wonder which of these options we can imagine ourselves most likely to take? Of course, things go bad as soon as they are at sea. A big storm comes up and the ship is in grave danger of sinking. Everyone on board is praying to their God for mercy. Everyone except Jonah. He is down in the hold fast asleep. When it is determined that the fuss is caused by Jonah and his failure to follow God’s wishes, he does what anyone would do. He offers to be thrown overboard so the ship and everyone on board can be saved. We would do that too, wouldn’t we? It always bugs me just a little bit when the goat in the story becomes the hero.

The sailors, for their part, are reluctant to have Jonah’s death on their hands. But after asking for forgiveness, they throw him overboard. And the storm ceases immediately. Then everyone offers a sacrifice to Jonah’s God and makes vows. That is what we call a conversion experience. But what about poor Jonah? Well, we’ve all know what happens since we were about three years old. He languishes in the belly of a big fish for three days and nights, singing God’s praises in a blend of verses from the psalms. When he is finally deposited back on dry land, God comes calling again. This time Jonah acquiesces. He goes to Nineveh, walks into the middle of

town and proclaims God's message. And the people of Nineveh go into mourning. Even the king joins in and makes a proclamation that everyone is to put on sackcloth and abstain from food and drink. Even the animals are adorned in sackcloth and denied food and water. And guess what? God notices. God notices and relents.

But what does Jonah do? He pouts. He makes a weak attempt to justify his initial action by claiming to know that God is merciful and this was going to happen anyway. But that is not why Jonah is angry and God knows it. Cats must also fail after all. When God challenges his right to be angry Jonah stomps outside the city, builds himself a booth, and sits down to wait and see what will happen. He is still secretly hoping for the destruction of Israel's enemy. He didn't expect them to repent. Maybe he even hoped they wouldn't. And he didn't expect God to have mercy on them. Jonah was full of expectations about the people of Nineveh and about God. In the end, God tries to comfort Jonah by providing some shade for his fuming soul. But when God sends a worm to remove the shade, Jonah becomes even angrier. Finally, God confronts Jonah with the ridiculousness of his behavior. Shouldn't God care for all creation? And there is where the story ends. And we are left with a question because there is no response from Jonah.

The reading from Matthew for today offers us yet another view of God's generosity and mercy. The workers who arrive throughout the day are all paid a full day's wages. Which leads to no small amount of grumbling by those who started at the beginning of the day. They expected to be paid more because they labored through the heat of the entire day. The landowner's response to them is essentially the same as God's response to Jonah. The message to us is that it doesn't matter when we turn to God. Whether it's in an instant like the sailors on Jonah's ship or the people of Nineveh or in the last hour, God will be there to take us in with joy and a full reward.

I have a former brother-in-law who was found guilty of operating a large Ponzi scheme and sentenced to serve time in Federal prison. Last year I heard that he had published a book on his religious conversion. My first reaction was a grumbling cynicism about the sincerity of his experience. Cats must also fail, you know. Oh sure, when things got tough the scoundrel found Jesus. Isn't that the way it goes? The answer to that of course, is yes, that is the way it goes. In moments of despair and doubt, when the ship is about to sink, we reach out for any little sliver of mercy that will keep us afloat. And he found a new life of faith. So, why couldn't I be joyful about his experience? The answer to that is I had him locked in as a permanent scoundrel and deceiver. A man who had left my sister-in-law to struggle on her own after years of marriage. My expectation of him was that he could never truly overcome that failure. Apparently, God had a different plan.

I think I am not alone in this. We all probably have someone in our lives about whom we have formed opinions that shade our expectations. It might be a family member or a friend who we have concluded will never change. It might be a someone whose interpersonal style is difficult or whose ideas we oppose. Expecting failure, perhaps even quietly hoping for it is all too human. But that is not God's way. God's mercy is wide and deep. God rejoices when the Ninevites repent and the prodigal returns. But what about us? Do we rejoice? Or do we grumble that it isn't fair because it doesn't meet our expectations? Amen.