

Today's face of faith is an interesting one because many of us have heard of him yet he doesn't have his stuff together; he messes up not once but several times. I don't know about you, but it's refreshing for me to have Jonah as a face of faith because I know that I don't always have my stuff together or maybe think I do when I don't. Perceptions aren't always real, y'all. And yet, the hope is that we, too, can be faces of faith even though we don't always have it all together. As a matter of fact, some of us struggle to have faith the size of a mustard seed. Some of you may recall hearing a version of the story of Jonah growing up- mainly the story of Jonah and the big fish, though many of us substituted fish for whale. Here's the cliff notes version. God calls Jonah, a prophet from Israel, to go and tell the people of Nineveh to repent of their evil ways. One small problem. Jonah despises the Ninevites, as Nineveh was a great enemy of Israel. It was the capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire, Israel's biggest enemy. The Assyrians were horrible to the Israelites. "They had ravaged and pillaged so much of Israel taking their wealth, occupying their land, and demanded that the people of Israel pay them tribute" (Nadia Bolz Weber, [sermon](#)). Jonah preferred to see them destroyed by God so instead of going to Nineveh, as God called him to do, Jonah ran in the opposite direction to the city of Tarshish by way of the town of Joppa. In Joppa he found a ship headed to Tarshish, so he paid for his ticket to catch a ride with some pagan sailors in order to get away from God's presence- so he thought. But God caused a great wind and storm that threatened everyone on board. The sailors were afraid for their lives and called upon their gods. Jonah, sound asleep below, had no clue what was happening and was awakened and told to call upon his God

to spare their lives. They soon discovered Jonah was the reason they were in this predicament, and Jonah told them if they threw him overboard, the sea would quiet down. So they threw him overboard, and the sea immediately calmed (1:15), and the sailors were even more afraid and made sacrifices to God. The Lord provided a big fish to swallow Jonah, and it is there in the belly of this fish that Jonah stayed for three days and three nights. In this fish, Jonah prayed reminding God that deliverance belongs to the Lord, but he never repented. Then God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto dry land. This was the second time God reminded Jonah that he was to go to Nineveh and give the Ninevites the message to repent. Jonah relented and walked through the large city of Nineveh preaching his **eight word sermon that mentioned nothing about the possibility of mercy**. Here's the sermon: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). And the Ninevites believed God and repented of their evil ways, including violence. Nineveh's King issued a decree that all people and animals should fast and cover themselves in sackcloth and sit in ashes, acts of repentance. This made Jonah most successful in his mission. But Jonah wasn't happy because God forgave Jonah's archenemies. This is where we find ourselves as we pick up in today's story. Let us listen for a word from God but first let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

If you were to google famous prophets, I doubt you'd find Jonah anywhere in the mix, though he is named among the Minor Prophets in the Bible. Jonah is also mentioned in 2 Kings as a prophet (14:25) and though the opening line of the book of Jonah does echo that of a prophet, "Now the

word of the LORD came to Jonah..." (1:1), Jonah doesn't act much like a prophet. Unlike the other prophets, who protested when called by God, Jonah offered no excuses as to why he couldn't be God's mouthpiece for the people. He said absolutely nothing and just ran away right after God gave him his assignment. What prophet wouldn't hope, pray or dream of the kind of response the Ninevites gave? Yet, it rarely, if ever, happened that way. But it did with Jonah on his first try- "the single most success story of the Bible- 120,000 people and countless animals change their ways in one day" with **an eight-word sermon** (workingpreacher.org, Karla Suomala). One might expect that Jonah's response to Nineveh's reaction might be as joyous as God's but instead of celebrating...Jonah had more than one bee in his bonnet- he had an entire hive. He was angry and unwilling for God to forgive his enemies for it offended his sense of justice. He is convinced that his way is better than God's way. However, humans' perception of justice isn't always God's perception of mercy and justice. But before we go and beat up on Jonah, let us take a deep look within ourselves and our own sense of justice. We are not exempt from such feelings, are we? Jonah was a part of the nation of Israel and when you belong to a nation, "the nation's enemies become ours as well, and to seek their good is viewed as being a traitor. The first casualty of war is the truth about the enemy. Dehumanizing those we oppose is the first step in propaganda. The other is now seen as evil incarnate, and any sympathy for them is unpatriotic" (*Preaching God's Transformative Justice*, Catherine & Justo Gonzalez). Jonah was caught because on one hand he was successful in his mission but as a loyal Israelite, he had failed his people miserably. "What

happens when we look at our neighbor today with such disdain, with such fury and fear? Little by little, caricature by caricature, we whittle away their humanity, their worth until all that is left is an idea of our own creation” (day1.org, Eric D. Barreto). So, what is your Nineveh? Who are your Ninevites? Who is it that you disregard their humanity?

The Ninevites’ choice to repent causes God to change God’s mind. Yes, you read and heard that correctly. Although some people today would argue that God doesn’t change God’s mind in the Bible, here God does just that. This idea of God changing God’s mind was not unthinkable in biblical times. The prophet Jeremiah mentions the possibility that if God plans evil against a nation, but that nation repents, then God would change his mind, and not bring disaster against that nation (18:7-8). One would think that if God can change God’s mind then humans can too?! But just because someone is obedient it doesn’t mean that they’re genuinely repentant. True repentance occurs when there are no more excuses- just full accountability for actions and a willingness to change. “Jonah may be willing to do whatever is required to avoid another of his unique sea voyages, but that does not mean that he has accepted God’s concern for the inhabitants of Nineveh. Is God looking merely for obedience, or does God desire actions that arise from hearts conformed to God’s own heart (*Feasting on the Word*, Timothy B. Cargal)? Jonah didn’t like that God changed God’s mind, and he became enraged. He didn’t want the Ninevites to be spared. He wanted them to suffer...to be punished for their sins...to get what they deserved and be destroyed. But that didn’t happen this time and Jonah

believed God was unfair. Therefore, he prayed and confessed that the reason he originally fled **WAS God, not Nineveh**. Can't you just hear Jonah? "Yeah, God, that's why I didn't want this stupid job in the first place- because I knew that you would be gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Bolz Weber)- Jonah was quoting from Israel's most hallowed of texts, the establishment of the covenant between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 34:6-7). Jonah says he knew it and yet he still turns a blind eye to the fact that God's steadfast love extends beyond any covenant. "Jonah expected mercy toward Israel, which also had proven idolatrous and periodically cruel. Yet he could not tolerate God's mercy offered to the other side, the enemy" (*The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible (TRSFBI)*). Jonah continues in his prayers asking God to please take his life from him, and God says, "Wait a minute. What right do you have to be angry?" (v. 4)? Even though Jonah knew the characteristics of God in his head, he refused to absorb them in his heart. After God asked this question, Jonah said nothing and went to a hill outside the city and made a booth- a little, flimsy lean to- likely made out of sticks and branches- that provided temporary shade, and he waited eagerly to see what would happen to his enemies (v. 5).

In this final chapter is where we find the crux of the book of Jonah where God tried to help Jonah shift his perspective and to grow in his faith. God provided a shrub, just as God had provided the big fish at just the right time. Jonah and the shrub doesn't get as much press as Jonah and the whale. God asks Jonah again, "Is it right for you to be angry about the

shrub?” “And Jonah said, Yes, angry enough to die.” (v. 9)? Dramatic much?! This is the second time Jonah has mentioned death. If God will not change to suit Jonah, Jonah would rather die. Anyone ever said that to God? I’ve gotten close in bargaining with God. It sounds like Nineveh isn’t the only one in need of repentance. Sometimes the desire to punish one’s enemies can drive someone into a self-destructive fury” (*Lectionary Sermon Series*, Anthony J. Tang). But none of us know about that, do we? Jonah’s fury blinds him from seeing Nineveh as God does, and from seeing how God also gave him a second and a third chance. Jonah has no problem receiving “God’s acts of deliverance and grace directed toward him but when it comes to extending that same longing for God’s grace to others, he is slow to make the connection” (Cargal). It’s as if Jonah has forgotten that God and God alone decides to whom God will give mercy. Yet, as humans, God has given us free will to choose how we will respond. And if you think about it, **love is an act of the will, just as anger is**. Both responses are essentially something we choose.

God makes it clear in his final response to Jonah that “Jonah is full of self-interest rather than the devotion to the justice he claims. Unlike Jonah, God cares for all peoples AND animals” (*TRSF*). God’s final question to Jonah leaves many of us unsettled, as it probably should. It “lingers in the air” (Amy Plantinga Pauw) and causes me to wonder how much more valuable is humanity, with our faults, failures, and flaws, than a shrub? “In the end, God calls us to a grace we can barely grant to our enemies. But that is the very essence of God’s grace, isn’t it? God’s grace both saves us and scares

us in equal measure. Because if God's love is so expansive, then whom do we have left to despise, whom do we have left to deem less than human, less than beloved by God" (Barreto)? Often "the human heart can cling to bitterness like a dog to a fleshy bone. It takes root so deeply within us that we would much rather die than forgive, much rather cling to pride than embrace mercy" (workingpreacher.org, Michael Chan). While we don't know what happened to Jonah, one thing is certain: The Ninevites aren't the only ones to receive God's unrelenting mercy in today's story. For God is the forgiver of the broken-hearted and repentant. "God is a God of second and third chances and will do whatever it takes to touch and change our hearts and make us whole" (Tang). There's a great **six word sermon** about that from the Gospel of John... "For God so loved the world..." (3:16). Will we trust in God's love for each of us, including animals- and even for our enemies no matter?! The choice is ours, even those of us who don't know always know our right hand from our left. Amen.