

A Lot Can Happen in Three Days
The Book of Jonah (part 3)
Jonah 4

For a few weeks this summer, we've immersed ourselves in the story of Jonah, this crazy parable from the Hebrew Scriptures that has made us laugh and shake our heads and, I hope, marvel a little at the creative genius of the Bible.

Here's a summary of the first three chapters:

God called the prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, the Jewish people's historic enemy. Archaeologists think Nineveh might have been the biggest city in the world in its day. Its reputation for cruelty and injustice was legendary. Jonah did everything he could to evade the call to go there; he booked a trip on a boat traveling in the opposite direction; he took long naps to drown out that voice in his head that would not leave him alone. God kept at him: a big storm knocked him off the boat, and even when he was willing to drown instead, God saved him for this important work. A big fish swallowed Jonah and carried him all the way to the Nineveh harbor. Circumstances conspired with God; Jonah finally arrived in the place he had not wanted to go, the life's work that he resisted until he had no choice.

Once he got to Nineveh, Jonah did—sort of—what God had been badgering him to do all along. 'I can see that what's happening in that city is not good,' God had said to Jonah. 'I want to save those people.' Of course Jonah heard those words through the filter of his people's experience. He couldn't imagine the Assyrians as anything other than enemy. So when he started walking around in Nineveh, the words that came out of his mouth weren't 'God cares about you.' They were: 'God's going to destroy you. You've got forty days; that's it. Then everything's going to come crashing down on you.'

Well, that's compelling.

But the Ninevites surprised Jonah. The people heard him. They paid attention, they did a little self-reflection, and they actually decided to change. So much so that news of the people's turning toward God made its way all the way to the King. He too was persuaded to repent, and he called the entire city to account for their evil ways.

God saw all of this, the Bible says—that the Assyrians' hearts could change. So God stopped the plan to destroy them. He changed his mind...or maybe God had never really wanted to destroy anybody. This is where we pick up the story today.

Jonah is characteristically petulant to see that God can forgive his enemies so readily. 'What?! I knew you weren't going to destroy them,' Jonah rails at God. 'I knew you couldn't do it. Can't you see they're just taking advantage of you? But no...you're way too kind and loving to punish them the way they deserve.' We can hear in Jonah's tirade echoes of characters from other stories we know. The elder brother in the prodigal son story, who couldn't imagine why his

father would throw a party for a son who had disrespected him and squandered his inheritance. Another Jesus story—about a crew of hard workers who got upset, not because they were paid unfairly, but because their employer seemed to think that the riffraff who showed up at 3:00 should also be paid a full day's wages.

Like most parables, this story's final chapter is exaggerated, almost cartoon-like. Jonah leaves the city early, so that he can go sit on a hill with a good view of the implosion of Nineveh he was sure was coming. The idea of fire and brimstone raining down on the city and its inhabitants had started to sound pretty fair to him. When it doesn't happen, he's disappointed, even angry. Twice in eleven verses God asks him, "Jonah, is your anger a good thing?" Twice, Jonah insists that it is, that anger is the absolutely appropriate response to something that, in his mind, God should have been more outraged about too.

Justice we understand, but grace can be a confusing thing. Just when we have drawn a line that tells us how far forgiveness should extend, God extends the boundary out further. We arrange things into an orderly, safe, secure world, and God messes it up—not with punishment, but with some undeserved, out-of-control mercy...or welcome...or openness.

About ten years ago, an app came out for iPhones, one of those video games that you can pull out and play while you're waiting in line anywhere. For a little while, *Pocket God* was one of the most popular mobile phone games available. In four years, it had more than six million downloads from the AppStore. The idea of the game was that you, the player, got to be god over a small island inhabited by pygmies. Ignore, just for a minute, the gross racism embedded in that picture. The player/God/you get to control both the island dwellers and what happens to them—whether they are rewarded, or punished, for the acts that you have made them do. You could give them a fishing pole to help them stave off famine, or you could drag in a hurricane, just when they are least prepared for it. In the last season of updates to the game, the island might have been headed toward either the apocalypse or eternal salvation—your choice. People loved that feeling of control. Six million downloads.

This is the reason we are not God.

We are often misled by our power over others; inclined to mistake our own anger, or thirst for vengeance, for justice. They are not the same. The way God looks at people, the hope God has for every part of his creation, the way God works out justice, has no scent of tribalism. It is never clouded by righteous indignation. To God there are no disposable people. This is why we need to keep hearing stories of the God who confounds us again and again with more grace and flexibility than we are inclined to measure out or think is deserved.

In his book called *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis pictured hell as a gray, ghostly town where people wander around all day muttering about the wrongs that consumed them in life, the offenses they could not forgive, grievances that loom so large, that there is no space for joy. I have met people who are living in this hell now. Maybe you have too. Like Jonah, prophets sulking under dead plants.

But it doesn't have to be that way. In 1953, a short story was published, called *The Man Who Planted Trees*. It's a sort of contemporary parable, and here it is, in very short form.

The story begins in 1913, as the narrator was on a solo hiking trip through the Provence region of France, and into the Alps. He walks through miles of unspoiled wilderness, but he runs out of water in a valley that is completely desolate, no trees, nothing growing. There is no trace of any thriving life, only some old, empty crumbling buildings. There's a well, but it's all dried up.

A shepherd comes along, and he leads the hiker to a natural spring where there is fresh water. The hiker is curious about this man who seems to live alone in this godforsaken place. Why would he choose to live here?

The shepherd had been widowed, and his only son had died too. After his family was gone, he had no more tolerance for living in a city where the pace and character of life had become grinding. Instead of lifting them up, industrial progress had weighed the people down. Ambition and competition meant that they were often in conflict with each other; the quality of their lives was not good. The shepherd couldn't stand the way they had destroyed the land around them, for the sake of a life that didn't even make them happy. And so he left, and moved into this silent space whose loneliness and desolation was preferable to what he had left behind.

At night, while the shepherd was telling his story to the hiker, he poured out on the table a sack of acorns, and he began to sift through them for the good ones, the ones that looked like they might have a live seed in them. And the next day the hiker walked alongside the shepherd as he climbed up to a ridge with the bag of acorns on his back. Every few feet, he would dig his metal walking stick a few inches into the ground, just enough to make a small hole. He dropped an acorn into every hole and covered it with dirt. The shepherd had been doing the same thing every day for three years. He was planting oak trees. A hundred thousand acorns he had planted, he calculated. About twenty thousand of those had sprouted. Of those, he said, he expected to lose about half—to squirrels or bad weather or whatever else might stop things from growing. But even so, that meant about ten thousand oak trees might grow in this place where nothing had grown before. He was studying beech trees too, he said, and he was thinking about birch in the valley, where there was more natural moisture.

The hiker stayed with the shepherd only a few days. But some years later, after he came back from fighting in World War I, he went back and found the shepherd again. He could see that thousands of young trees had taken root. Some were taller than him. There were new streams that flowed from places where the shepherd had dragged logs to dam up snow melt higher up on the mountain. And somehow, with no tools and no technology, not much design, no more than a ten percent success rate, the shepherd seemed to have started a chain reaction of growth in the forest. Now the wind carried seeds from one plant to another piece of ground. Birds had come back, and bees.

The lonely man who lived in the valley never spoke publicly about his work, and no one else saw him do it. So when professional foresters came to look at what was happening, the only thing they could see was a sort of strange natural phenomenon, a re-generation they couldn't explain.

The shepherd's name was Bouffier. For four decades, Bouffier planted trees, one acorn at a time. Only ten percent of them survived. But over those forty years, the valley came back. It began to look almost like a Garden of Eden. By the end of World War II, even as the rest of France was largely ruined, this valley remained vibrant with life. People moved there. Children played in the forest. All because of the tenacity of one man, who, one acorn at a time, created goodness in a place where there was none to be found.

It is not God's way to destroy creation, even when it disappoints him. It is sometimes the human way. But God is always looking for agents of redemption, people who will be persistent enough to find and pick up and regenerate the seeds of goodness that remain, no matter how bad things have gotten. If God can save a forest with one heartbroken, introverted shepherd, and whole city with a bigoted, reluctant prophet, who knows what God could do if we traded our personal, outraged sense of justice for a vision of God's grace. Maybe save a whole denomination. Maybe even a whole country.