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Jonah 3:10 – 4:11

“Generous grace!”

It was July 1938, back in the early years of long-distance aviation. A daring pilot named Douglas Corrigan filed a flight plan, assuring the authorities he was heading west to California. In dense, pea soup fog, he took off from a Brooklyn, New York airfield. 28 hours later he landed his tiny single-engine plane in Ireland. Asked to explain, the pilot claimed the fog was too thick and his compass had failed. Everyone knew he wasn't telling the truth. Everyone knew he had no intention of flying west to California. Everyone realized he wanted to achieve a rare trans-Atlantic flight in a plane built much too small for that. Still, over a million people showed up for his ticker-tape parade down Broadway. The tongue-in-cheek headline in the *New York Post* the next day celebrated “Wrong Way Corrigan” -- typed backwards across the top of the front page.

Perhaps there was a time you were just as enthused with the exploits of a fellow named Jonah. Yeah, that Jonah. He's the one who was supposed to go east to the great city of Nineveh and **“preach against it.”** Instead, he boarded a boat to get as far west as he could go. Soon enough a storm rages against the boat. The wind is so crazy violent, the boat is breaking apart. Jonah goes overboard. As he plunges into the waves, the Lord provides a great fish, and it swallows him alive. For three days and three nights Jonah is in the belly of the fish. Till the Lord directs the fish close to the shoreline, and it regurgitates Jonah still alive onto dry land.

For a child this is entertainment. Even for some grown-ups it calls to mind the old Disney cartoon with Pinocchio, Geppetto, Jiminy Cricket, and Monstro the whale. But a prophet of God sailing away from the very people God wanted him to reprimand and rescue? A child of God turning his back on fellow human beings his heavenly Father dearly loves? A believer given the opportunity to save his fellow sinners but then pulling a “Wrong Way Corrigan” and heading in the opposite direction? That's not so amusing at all!

So after Chapter 1, does the biblical account get any better? Does Jonah's story improve? Depends on your point of view. You see, after being humiliated by the storm and rescued by the great fish, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: **“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim the message I give you”** (Jonah 3:1). This time Jonah headed east, just as the Lord instructed him. Once he arrived, we imagine Jonah entering busy shops in commercial districts; going from house to house in residential neighborhoods; knocking on doors; stopping passersby on the street and all the while addressing gatherings of two or twenty or fifty or a hundred or a thousand or more. His message spread quickly. Soon, we're told, every single person in the vast city of Nineveh was aware of Jonah's dire prophecy: **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.”**

And amazingly **“the Ninevites believed God”** and **“turned from their evil ways!”** Against all odds they believed that Jonah's message was the Word of the one and only true God. They believed that God actually does punish violence and greed and adultery and hatred and failing to give honor to the Creator. They believed God had the right to destroy them for that. They also believed that God might be amazingly generous with his grace. If he should warn their godless society and give them this opportunity to repent, they concluded, certainly he might also be merciful and compassionate. And that's exactly what happened. The people of Nineveh repented. **“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.”**

That brawny kid in your school who bullies you and is always threatening to humiliate you in front of your classmates? How would you feel if God blessed him with popularity, success, and a long and happy life? That's how Jonah felt about what God did for Nineveh. That loudmouth you work with who can't seem to stop bragging about himself: How would you feel if the Lord blessed him with a promotion and better pay and authority over your position? That's how Jonah felt. That Hollywood-type who voices opinions that go completely opposite your own: How would you feel if the Lord blessed her a blockbuster movie hit and even more airtime for voicing her obnoxious opinions? That's how Jonah felt.

You see, Jonah came from a puny postage stamp of a nation that wasn't doing so good. In the Old Testament's only other reference to the prophet Jonah, the Holy Spirit says that at Jonah's time **“everyone in Israel ... was suffering”** (2 Kings 14:26). Meantime, Nineveh was the capital of the big bad bully of an empire known as Assyria. Jonah didn't want the Lord to bless them with popularity, success, and a long and happy history. The emperor who resided in Nineveh was loud and proud and could always brag about the success of his vast and well-trained military. Jonah didn't want the Lord to give him a promotion and even more authority over puny Israel. Nineveh and its empire had been in decline for decades. Jonah didn't want God to give that city a blockbuster blessing and regain its voice in that part of the world.

Jonah didn't like the people of Nineveh. He hated them. And he tried to run in the other direction and escape what the Lord had called him to do; he tried as hard as he could *not* to preach in Nineveh. Here's why, in his own words: **“Lord,**

... I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." So when he went and preached and the whole city repented and God relented, Jonah wasn't surprised. He was just angry. He was just angry about how generous God is with his grace.

- What if I picture Living Savior as a church mostly for people who dress like me, who appreciate my sense of humor, and who are so easy to talk to because they have so many things in common with me? What if I picture Living Savior as a church mostly for people who agree with my politics and who like everything that I like? What if I wouldn't mind if we didn't gain too many of those folks who are different from me? Has Jonah's attitude taken hold?
- What if I question whether it's wise to send our missionaries to countries hostile to my country, like Russia or Venezuela? What if I can't get excited that the number of Christians is exploding in Communist China and Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India and in the impoverished nations of central Africa? What if I can't get excited about that because I can't get excited about those countries? Has Jonah's approach become mine?
- Has praying for the success of God's Word among my own kind of people become such a priority, I really don't have time to pray for the success of God's Word among others?

From time to time there is indeed a Jonah in each of us. In view of that, you and I can praise God that there is also a Jesus for each of us. You've observed how Jesus operated. He patiently corrected and instructed disciples who were quite narrow-minded and short-sighted as to who he had come to save. On the cross Jesus presented himself as the acceptable sacrifice to God on behalf of all those who are self-centered and unkind toward others. By word and sacrament he keeps assuring me and you that our guilt for woefully misplaced priorities has been washed away by his blood. Jesus commissioned his disciples then and now to **"make disciples of all nations."** He commissioned you and yours and me and mine to regard disciple-making work as international, multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-language work. He commissioned you and yours and me and mine to make the salvation of **"all nations"** and all sorts of people as the church's highest priority.

Who knows? Might the preaching of God's Word continue to bear more fruit ... more new believers ... more outside of our native land than within its borders? Might God actually have in mind that for the next 50 years the Christian Church will prosper more on other continents than on our own? Might God be so **"gracious and compassionate ..., slow to anger and abounding in love"** that someday Christian churches in Asia and Africa will be sending missionaries to the United States of America? That could certainly happen, couldn't it?

You see, God's plan reaches far beyond the histories of countries and cultures. God sees far beyond the typical concerns of one nation and its citizens. At Jonah's time he was concerned about 120,000 children in Nineveh so young that they could not **"tell their right hand from their left."** He also was alarmed for their older brothers and sisters, for their parents, grandparents, and neighbors. Like Jonah's fellow Israelites, all these souls were precious to the heavenly Father. By the power of the Holy Spirit they **"turned from their evil ways."** In mercy the Lord had compassion and relented and forgave and blessed them. What could possibly keep the Lord from being just as generous with his grace and compassion toward people today that are quite different from you and me?

As we read, "Wrong Way Jonah" finally went to Nineveh and preached the Word of God. When the whole city of Nineveh repented and God relented, he became "Burning with Anger Jonah." In fact, in the final passages of his book he portrays himself as a pouting, petulant child. When Nineveh repented and God relented, Jonah stormed out of the city. He made himself a simple shelter. God provided a leafy plant to grow up and provide shade for his head, **"and Jonah was very happy about it."** But then God provided a worm that chewed the plant till it withered up. Then came a scorching east wind and a sun that blazed on Jonah's head. He became so angry, he told God he wanted to die.

He didn't, of course. Not then, at least. Jonah lived long enough to write this account so that you and I could see how foolish he was and how foolish it still is to be angry with God when he's generous. First Timothy 2:3, **"God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."** Thank God for his **"grace and compassion"** so that that has included me and my kind of people, whoever they might be. Thank God for his **"grace and compassion"** so that it has included you and your kind of people, whoever they might be. But it also includes folks so different from us, we might have a very hard time understanding their language, their food, how they dress, how they think. Their entire way of life may baffle us. We may view their nation as strange and their government as a threat to our own personal security.

Still, **"God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth ... (about) Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom"** to set all sorts of people free from guilt and fear and death itself. Dear sister, dear brother, you and I cannot be angry about that. We will rejoice! We will praise God! Yes, we will pray for the Holy Spirit to bless Christian witnesses to other languages, cultures, and nations all over the world. We will pray also for those who hear them, so that they too might repent and God might relent and that God might be generous with his saving grace also toward them. Amen.