

In a Stew of Resentment (Jonah 4)

Neil Millar

And Jonah cried out: 'Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone put on sackcloth... And on seeing what they did, God changed God's mind about bringing calamity; God did not do it.

And they all lived happily ever after!!

If the Book of Jonah was a simple moral tale, that's possibly how it would've finished – at the end of chapter three, with everyone reconciled, and everything resolved – with peace.

But that's not how this story ends. In place of a simple denouement, we have this awkward extra chapter, full of provocation and irritation. Chapter 4, verse one: *And all this was bad to Jonah, very bad, and he was burning within himself. 'I knew it! I just knew it!' he fumes: 'I knew this'd happen; right from the start. It's why I fled in the first place, why I didn't want to do this; I knew you'd end up showing mercy; withholding punishment. You're too compassionate, too gracious, that's your problem. You're far too kind; to everyone, damn it!!' | 'Well, you know what, YHWH – O merciful one? I'm over it!! Leave me alone. Let me die. I'd rather be dead than live with this.'*

He's not happy and he's not afraid to show it. And, if this story were to be performed, as Jeanette Mathews suggests it would've been, (on stage, as it were) then I can imagine Jonah shaking his arms in the air, clenched fists, and stomping off stage at this point. In a total hissy fit.

We'll look at God's response in a moment, but first, a couple of comments about this fizzing opening diatribe. Jonah is angry and he lets God have it (and none too politely!). This kind of language as prayer, prayer as quarrelling, can sound strange to us, and risky, but in fact, it's 'a time-honoured biblical practice'. Another expression of protest. 'Moses, Job, David, and St Peter were all masters at it', Eugene Peterson once wrote (1992.157). Mostly these "giants" of our tradition quarrel with God because God isn't doing what they want God to do. And so, it is with our enraged prophet. Jonah is smouldering because in his reckoning these Ninevites deserve punishment. In his judgment they've been evil and violent. They believe and do all the wrong things, they've been bad to Israel, bad to God, and they deserve a thorough smiting!! And what happens? He issues God's warning, they repent, and God relents. Grr. It's galling to Jonah, infuriating!! There are eleven verses in this chapter and the word anger occurs six times.

In the abstract (from the safety of a relatively unthreatened existence), Jonah's incensed reaction sounds spiteful and unappealing. Though perhaps we'd view it differently if we were in Ukraine's current situation, or the victim of abuse caused by someone now being shown mercy. One thing you can't fault is Jonah's honesty. There's no pious pretence here; he is totally upfront about his thoughts and feelings – vengeful and ungracious as they are. And there's something to be said for this – naming (praying) our shadow side – our resentment, our malicious and vindictive thoughts. It's not pretty but as with other forms of lament, it's a step, at least, in the process of cleansing and release.

So, how does YHWH respond to our disgruntled prophet? ... Does he arc up and give Jonah a lecture about being ungrateful and hard-hearted, or threaten to smite *him*?? No, calmly, God responds as God so often does to

obstinate earthlings, with a question. *Adam, where are you? Cain, where is your brother Abel? Peter, do you love me? Jonah: 'Is it good for you to burn?' OR perhaps better, is your burning anger leading to anything worthwhile?* It's a good question and it does what good questions always do, which is to invite contemplation – a turn to wonder. God isn't defensive or self-justifying; nor does God condemn or deny Jonah's state. Rather, s/he acknowledges the anger and invites reflection. Jonah, what's this anger suggesting? What's it doing to you? And where is it leading?

When anger erupts in us, it's a sign that something is amiss, out of alignment, blocked or broken (cf. Peterson 157). 'Anger is our sixth sense for sniffing out wrong in the neighbourhood', Peterson suggests. 'Diagnostically it is virtually infallible'. Anger is a signal that something isn't right, that 'there is evil or incompetence or stupidity [or selfishness] lurking about.' God's response is to invite Jonah to attend to his anger.

At this point, Jonah is unwilling to accept God's offer. He doesn't even bother to speak; he just storms out of town. Where, it says, he 'sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself [and] sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.' Stubbornly wishing, one suspects, that God might still decide to smite them.

But that's not going to happen. God and Nineveh have settled accounts. It's with Jonah that things are unreconciled, and with the human struggle to accept God's anarchic mercy that the story contends. God's response is to give Jonah some space and TLC: he appoints a fast-growing, apparently leafy plant to shade and succour the overheated prophet. *And Jonah rejoiced over the plant with great rejoicing.* This is more like it.

Next day, ever helpful (!!), God sends the very hungry caterpillar who eats through a cupcake, a pickle, a piece of watermelon, and... – no, just joking! He's described as a 'worm' here, *who eats into the plant, causing it to wilt*. Picturing this rather humorous scene, (humorous if it's not happening to you!) I'm reminded of the saying that – 'God comes to us cleverly disguised as our life'. That's what appears to be happening here – God working with, in and through the prevailing circumstances. *And, it happened, we read, at the rising of the sun, that God appointed a scorching east wind; and the sun smited the head of Jonah and he became faint and wished for his breath to die and he said, 'Better is my death than my life.'*

Mmmm; not happy!! At which point, God asks again: *Is it good for you to burn over the *** plant?* The Hebrew word is untranslatable, which perhaps is just as well!! To which Jonah replies, caustically: *It is good for me to burn, until death.*

'When we are angry, we know we are on to something that matters', Peterson wrote. Jonah is so angry that he wants to die. Clearly, something is out of alignment, something important, but what is it? What's the real issue; and where's it located?

What our anger fails to do, Peterson added, is 'tell us whether the wrong is outside or inside'. 'We usually begin by assuming that the wrong is outside us' – our spouse, a parent, child, friend, colleague or God has done something offensive or has not done something we expected, and we are disappointed, hurt ... angry. And it's important to acknowledge and honour our experience. 'But [if] we track the anger carefully, we may also find it leads to a wrong within us – wrong information, inadequate understanding, [an] underdeveloped heart.' If we can also acknowledge and bear the pain of this, get down off our high horse (which is another way of saying humble

ourselves), that's when we can be pulled out of our quarrel and into the larger life of God. Life marked by reconciliation and release. Our heart grows larger and with it our capacity to 'embody the love of God in the world' (Killen and de Beer 1994.43).

So, what of Jonah – consumed with rage; angry enough to die? We all know, and have probably experienced that anger avoided or indulged is inevitably debilitating. We 'become its prisoner' (Cowdell 2004.86). Someone has hurt or disappointed us or just won't give us what we want, but we're the ones who keep suffering. Jonah is being held hostage by his own anger; he's trapped in resentment and bitterness. He will not be conciliated.

In the story, God makes one more attempt to reason with Jonah, to draw him out of his cell and into a more spacious, gracious place. *Jonah, Jonah... you are concerned about the plant, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?* It's another question, a tender expression of God's compassion, and that's where the story leaves us. At this point, words cease – and we, the audience, are left simply present to this tenderness.

As for Jonah...??? Did this troubled prophet ever come to terms with God's kindness and compassion for *all* – all the people, *all* the animals, *all* the earth? Did he accept the invitation to attend to his resistance, and surrender his wounds, or did he continue in bitter defiance – stubbornly smouldering on, stewing in resentment?

'Learning to live without our prejudices and protective reactions can feel like hell', says Rowan Williams, 'but the real hell is never to be able to rest

from the labours of self-defence' (2003.48) Jonah, Jonah, 'Is it good for you to burn?' Is your anger leading to anything worthwhile? Why not look at it, look into it, and let it lead you into deeper truth, a bigger heart, a more spacious life? Jonah, Jonah, this burden is wearing you. Come, let us look at it together. Come to me, and you will find rest for your soul. Come, will you come?

References

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