



What About All These Animals?

TEXT
Jonah 4

October 7, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Well, we have been journeying with Jonah for several weeks now, and the story finally comes to conclusion. Actually, it may be better to say it stops more than it reaches a conclusion. The story stops with Jonah and God in mid-conversation. God asks Jonah, “What about these animals?”

What animals? I wonder if there were plans to write a sequel, *Jonah Part 2*, where we could find out if Jonah ever grows up — and find out what God is talking about with these animals.

We find our reluctant prophet struggling to wrap his head and heart around the fact that the grace of God can be extended to those who Jonah can’t be gracious to.

Remember, Nineveh is the capital of Assyria. Assyria was Israel’s enemy. Did you remember that Assyria invaded Israel? Assyria overthrew them, everything north of Jerusalem. The practice of the Assyrians to maintain control over conquered lands was to relocate the conquered folks. They scattered the Jews across the ancient world, separating

communities, breaking down relationships, attempting to erode Jewish culture. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were scattered, lost. The hatred for the Assyrians was deep and long-lasting.

To be gracious to them was too much for Jonah. His disgust fills every aspect of his speech. He protests and storms out of the city. Jonah sits on a hill outside of the city. And then things go from bad to worse. The only positive thing that Jonah finds is the gift of a bush — a bush that grows up overnight and provides poor Jonah with a bit of shade to comfort him from the heat of the sun and the steam coming out of his ears. But then, just as quickly as the bush appears, it is destroyed, and the blistering heat of the sun returns.

This is the last straw. Jonah can’t handle it anymore. He has another temper tantrum. And God says, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Jonah says, “Yes, angry enough to die!”

God says, “You want to die because of what happened to the bush? But you didn’t create the bush. The bush doesn’t belong to you. The bush belongs to me. I am the creator of the

bush.” (We see where God is going with this.)

“So also, I created the Ninevites. Shouldn’t I care for them? They belong to me. Those 120,000 Ninevites who do not know their left hand from their right, shouldn’t I care for them?”

And then, out of left field, God says, “And also the animals?”

“What? What animals?”

Now, we may have a division in the house here. For some, animals are far preferred to people. Some people love their pets more than their children.

At our house, it turns out we are not great pet people. We had a cat for 15 years — clawed our furniture, left dead bunnies or baby birds on the welcome mat at the front door. The cat loved to sit in your lap, but the cat would drool on you. I think we had the only cat in the history of felines that drooled.

When we moved to Brookside, our cat ditched us. She loved to go outside, so we let her roam. She scouted out the new neighborhood, and after a while, she didn’t come home. She actually moved down the street, and she now lives with another family. She upgraded. I’m very broken up about it.

If God says, “Tom, have you considered the animals?”

“No, no, no, I haven’t.”

But don’t think pets here. Think raccoons and porcupines, oxen and goats. In Jonah’s day, they didn’t have any pets. They had animals, but they weren’t pets. So why in the world would God bring up the animals?

If I understand the text, this story pushes us, by reminding us that the grace of God is always more expansive than we think. This story reminds us, as people of faith, that we are always struggling to keep up with the grace of God.

Jonah is trying to adjust to God being gracious to the people of Assyria, and as soon as Jonah begins to imagine that, God moves the goalposts. *But Jonah, have you thought about the animals? What about the animals?* We are always struggling to keep up with the grace of God.

I’ve had a dream — a recurring dream, actually. I dream that I am driving up Mission Road, and as I near the sanctuary here at Village on Mission, I discover the parking lot is overflowing. And then it dawns on me that there is an event here. Sometimes it is a memorial service. Once it was a nationally known speaker who I was to introduce, and other times it’s worship on Easter. But every time, I realize I am late.

I have to park two blocks up near Homestead Drive, grab my robe from the backseat and start running to the church. As soon as I near 66th Street, the church building stands up on

four strong legs and runs two blocks down the road. The church building moves! In this dream, I am never able to catch up with the church.

It doesn’t take a trained therapist to interpret that dream. Sometimes we all feel like we just can’t keep up. Sometimes it’s our schedule. But when it comes to God, we are always struggling to keep up — for the love of God is always more expansive than we can imagine.

Here’s what I think our take-away is. We are always desperately trying to keep up with God. God is always beyond the limits of our imagination. The truth is, as God’s children, as soon as we expand or grow our perspective on the grace of God, God moves on. We realize our new perspective is not the end of the journey, but just one more step. We are always trying to keep up with God, for the grace of God is extravagant and expansive.

Just as Jonah is wrapping his head around God’s grace being poured out on his enemies, God says, “Don’t forget about the animals. You know how I love my animals.” And Jonah finds his imagination stretched even more.

It is World Communion Sunday. I will admit that for the longest time, I came to this Sunday, and the mental image was that this table, from which we serve symbols of God’s love, was large enough to stretch around the world. And through time, there would be a place set for every last person,

because God is the creator of every person, and all belong to God and are loved by God.

That includes our friends and our enemies. There is room at this table for prisoners and poets, for moderates and extremists, for the “one percenters” and the desperately poor. There is room at this table for the young and the old, for every last person on the face of this earth. This table is for the world.

But recently, my imagination has been stretched even more, and I realize, “What about the animals?” Maybe it wasn’t a joke. What happens when we remember that the love of God is not simply for all the people of the world, but for the world?

The truth is, God made the whole world, and the love of God is expansive and extravagant. God loves this fragile, threatened planet; that’s a statement of faith.

So perhaps we are being pulled by new imagination toward a more faithful way to live that demonstrates respect and care for that which belongs not to us — we didn’t create it — but to God.

God said, “Jonah, go to Nineveh” — and with dramatic encouragement, Jonah gets to Nineveh. And Jonah might assume God would say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You finally got there.”

But no, God says, “But what about the animals, Jonah? Did you think I wouldn’t care about the animals?”

That's the thing about God: We are always struggling to catch up with the extravagance of God's grace. Just look at this table — the love here. There is no limit to this holy love. There is no limit.

Imagine that — or at least try to imagine that.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.