

It was a Friday morning, I think, and I was sitting in my seminary Old Testament class. We must've been reading one of the creation stories that day, because the conversation pivoted to a more profound and philosophical discussion of *why*. Why did this God up and decide to create all things? What motivated this God to create stratus clouds and saltwater and avocados and chickens... and, for that matter, humans? What sparked that choice in the divine mind? Why? Why did this Creator God choose to create?

Like all good questions in seminary, there was no clear or simple answer. But at one point, my professor mused: "I wonder if God created us because God wanted someone to talk to."

To which the TA replied: "I think God got more than he bargained for in that one."

For my part, I believe God created us out of an outpouring of divine love and a desire to be in relationship. But I'll go with the TA on this: in giving us the power of speech, God may have gotten more than he bargained for. We humans can be awfully mouthy. Sometimes I wonder if God regretted giving us vocal cords.

At the very least, I wonder if God regretted giving Jonah vocal cords. All throughout the season of Lent, we've been talking about the story of the prophet Jonah. By now, you know the story: God calls the prophet Jonah to get up, go to Nineveh, and preach against the wicked lot of them... but instead, Jonah gets up, goes to Joppa, and boards a boat in an ill-advised attempt to "flee... from the presence of the LORD" (Jonah 1:3, NRSV). God, of course, catches up with Jonah in the form of a great storm that threatens to destroy the boat and a great fish that swallows the prophet whole. After

three days and three nights in the belly of said great fish, Jonah gets with the program, responds to God's (reiterated) call, and preaches against the Ninevites: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4, NRSV).

Only... Nineveh isn't overthrown, at least not in the way Jonah wants or expects. The Ninevites repent. They proclaim a fast and put on sackcloth and ashes. They turn from their "evil ways"... and in response, God turns from his destructive plans. God meets their repentance with mercy.

And Jonah is mad about it! What's more, Jonah is not quiet about it. Jonah and God have some words. And church, this might be the coolest part of the story – and in a story that includes people getting tossed overboard and swallowed by sea creatures, that's saying something. This might be the coolest part of the story, because God and Jonah converse. They converse in a way that makes me wonder if my Old Testament TA was right, and that maybe God got more than he bargained for in giving humans the power of speech.

Here in chapter four, God and Jonah converse. It's the first time we really see that in this story. We've listened as God calls Jonah and directs Jonah. We've eavesdropped as Jonah prays to God. Throughout the story, God has talked to Jonah. Jonah has talked to God. But they haven't really *talked*. Here, though? Here, there's some real back and forth between God and his prophet.

What's more? The prophet isn't pulling any punches. He's not watching his mouth. He's letting God have it. Like Job and Qohelet and Habakkuk, who question God; like Abraham, who negotiates with God; like Jacob, who wrestles with God; Jonah has the *chutzpah* – as one commentator puts it – "the chutzpah to go toe-to-toe with

God.”<sup>1</sup>

And what are they going toe-to-toe about? Just one of the oldest arguments in human history: justice vs. mercy.

At face value, justice and mercy aren't compatible. Pure justice (in its most basic form) is one getting what one deserves. (I know, because that's what Wikipedia says.) Pure mercy (in its most basic form) is one getting better than what one deserves. They're mutually exclusive concepts, altogether incompatible... except for the small loophole in which they exist together in the very nature of God. The scriptures abound with affirmations of God's justice *and* mercy. “All his ways are just,” the author of Deuteronomy tells us (Deuteronomy 32:4, NRSV). But at the same time, that same author tells us “the LORD your God is a merciful God” (Deuteronomy 4:31, NRSV). There are dozens more scriptures like that, scriptures that describe God as “just” in one breath and “merciful” in another. So... which is it? Is God entirely just, or utterly merciful? I thought they weren't compatible. Which is it, Bible? Is God merciful or just? The short answer is “it's complicated” – perhaps more complicated than Wikipedia has room for.

Which brings us to Jonah, and God, and the “conversation” they're having. Conversation. You know what? Let's call things what they are. This isn't a conversation. This is a full-blown argument. Jonah is making the argument for justice. *The Ninevites are wicked!* he's saying. *You said so yourself! And wickedness and sin deserve punishment, so... hop to it! Get punishin'! Time's a-wastin'! Give them what they deserve. That's what's just, what's right.* Now, Jonah's passionate plea for a just reckoning here may be somewhat motivated by his all-out hatred of the Ninevites – I'm not pretending he's

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<sup>1</sup> Jared Byas, “Rediscovering Jonah – Part 3,” episode 146, in *The Bible for Normal People* Podcast (November 9, 2020).

neutral – but still, his argument is at least logically sound.

God, on the other hand, is making the argument for mercy. *They're my creation, God says, I made them! They're ignorant and don't even know how to do what's right! And there's hope for them, so I choose to spare and save and redeem and transform them. Because I can! I'll give them better than what they deserve. That's what's merciful, what's right.*

It might sound a bit one-sided (when in doubt, side with God, right?), but it's not. The scriptural text gives voice to both sides of the argument. What's more, the scriptural text gives both sides equal space and ink and voice and airtime. And when I say equal, I mean *equal* – down to the very number of words. Forty-seven words from Jonah, making the case for justice... and forty-seven words from God, making the case for mercy. (Yes, I counted.) The author is taking great pains to give both justice and mercy their due.

And then the book just... ends. It ends without resolution. It ends with a question. It's like someone just... pressed "pause" or something. It feels like we're missing chapter five, and I just want to look up and say: *hello?!? You wanna resolve this whole conundrum about justice vs. mercy? I could use a little clarity here. Seems it might be important.* But we don't get resolution or clarity. We don't get a chapter five or even a vague post-script. We get a pause.

But at this moment... at this stage in our deep dive with Jonah... at this point in the season of Lent... I wonder if that pause doesn't have to be a frustration. I wonder if it can be an invitation.

I wonder if it can be an invitation to engage at the point of pause; to pick up

where Jonah's story leaves off; to keep on wrestling with the big questions like justice and mercy; to resist overly simplistic explanations that are just plain beneath us; to discover that the journey of wrestling may well be as valuable as the destination.

I wonder if that pause can be an invitation to do what Jonah does: to lay it all out there for God; to let God have it, if that's what's in us (God can take it); to issue our frustrations and demand some answers; to be honest in our relationships with our Creator; to not hold back (even at the risk of blasphemy) from the God who desires our whole selves.

And most of all, I wonder if that pause can be an invitation to remember what Jonah seems to have forgotten: that as sinful, broken human beings, we are recipients first and foremost of God *mercy*. God's primary way of dealing with us has not been rooted in justice, but rather in mercy. God hasn't given us what we deserve, but rather so much better than what we deserve. I don't know how it all fits together in God's nature... but I for one am grateful that God chose the path of mercy with me.

At the end of Jonah chapter 4, there's a pause. At the end of Jonah chapter 4, we find no chapter 5. But at the end of Jonah chapter 4, as we turn the page, we find the words of another prophet of the Lord – one who's perhaps more obedient and less colorful than our Jonah. We find the prophet Micah, and his words of promise, and his hard truths. And in those pages, we find these words: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NIV). Sounds as close to a "Jonah chapter 5" as we're going to get. Sounds like good advice for Jonah, and for us. Sounds like a good plan for Lent, and for life.

Church, I can't hope to resolve this whole "justice vs. mercy" thing today. It's just too much of a mystery. Plus, I have like 14 days to raise Jesus from the dead, so I'm going to be otherwise engaged for the foreseeable future. But I'm in, I'm here for it – here to keep wrestling with the tension, and here to keep resting in God's mercy. I hope you are too.

So keep on holding it in tension, church. Act justly. Love mercy. And walk humbly with your God.

*Prayer*