

TITLE: "Judgment or Mercy"

TEXT: Jonah 2-4

### Introduction – Not-so-bad squirrels

There are two scourges at our house. One is rats. There are two kinds. The larger have bushy tails; the smaller have stripes. Some call them squirrels and chipmunks, but that is just being kind. Anyway, there are often lines of bushy-tailed rats waiting to get on the feeder and striped rats vacuuming up the seeds that fall on the ground.

Another scourge is our oak tree. It waits until the first snow to start letting go its leaves, so I can't rake them. Then it lets go of leaves a little at a time all winter so they fill the gutters and keep them from draining. Right now some of last year's leaves are still clinging to its branches ...taunting me.

I was looking out at both scourges the other morning. Bushy-tailed rats were on the feeder and oak leaves were matted in the grass. Then I saw a squirrel stuffing as many oak leaves in her mouth as she could. ...She was probably building a nest, but who'd a thunk a MISERABLE squirrel would be helping me with yard work.

So, what do squirrels and oak leaves have to do with Jonah who lived almost 3,000 years ago, and what do they all have to do with our world today and each of us here this morning? ...Let's see.

#### 1. Jonah's justice

Last week we heard that God told the prophet Jonah to go and preach to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capitol city of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians had defeated Israel's Northern Kingdom in 797 BC and the people in the Southern Kingdom, where Jonah preached, were aware of how vulnerable they were to the overwhelming power of Assyria.

As we heard last week, Jonah, and everyone else in the Southern Kingdom, feared and hated the Assyrians. Jonah wanted God to destroy Nineveh. Jonah did NOT want to go to his enemies and preach repentance. So Jonah got on a ship that was going as far AWAY from Nineveh as possible.

A storm came up and the ship was starting to go down. Jonah told the sailors to throw him over the side, which they did, and the text says: "the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights." Now this morning's text:

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup>saying,  
'I called to the LORD out of my distress,

and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,

and you heard my voice.

<sup>3</sup>You cast me into the deep,

into the heart of the seas,

and the flood surrounded me;

all your waves and your billows

passed over me.

<sup>4</sup>Then I said, "I am driven away

from your sight;

how\* shall I look again

upon your holy temple?"

<sup>5</sup>The waters closed in over me;

the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped around my head

<sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land

whose bars closed upon me for ever;

yet you brought up my life from the Pit,

O LORD my God.

<sup>7</sup>As my life was ebbing away,

I remembered the LORD;

and my prayer came to you,

into your holy temple.

<sup>8</sup>Those who worship vain idols

forsake their true loyalty.

<sup>9</sup>But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!’

Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

When Jonah said, “What I have vowed I will pay,” he expressed the basis of his faith, which was JUSTICE. He tried to run away from the Lord ...God punished him by having him get swallowed by a whale. When he repented and agreed to preach to the people of Nineveh, God had the whale spit him up on dry land. Jonah was OK with that. Jonah was big on justice. Justice says, ‘If you are good, you get rewarded; if you are bad, you get punished.’

Even today, many people think that that is how God works. If things are going well, they think God is blessing them. If things are going badly, they wonder what they did wrong to deserve it. ...But there is a serious FLAW to this way of thinking and we will see that flaw played out in Jonah’s life.

## 2. God’s mercy

The flaw is the fact that there is no place for mercy in Jonah’s justice. What do I mean by mercy? Mercy is undeserved love. Erma Baumbek used to say, “When a child deserves love the least, she needs it the most.” That’s mercy. In Exodus 34:6 we read that God is, “A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Throughout the Bible, God is described as merciful.

Here’s how God showed that mercy to the people of Nineveh:

**3**The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’

<sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across.

<sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup>Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

The Assyrians were idol-worshippers. They had attacked Israel's Northern Kingdom. They may have killed or captured some of Jonah's relatives or friends. They're behavior was wicked in the sight of God. ...But God had mercy on them.

How does that apply to the world today? ...It means that God wants the Nazis, the North Koreans, the North Vietnamese, the Iraqis, the Afghans and the terrorists, all the people we have fought in wars, to be saved. God did not, and does not, condone their behavior, nor does God excuse it. But God hopes that all people will repent of their evil ways and turn to God as the Assyrians did in the text. That's the way God is. God "...desires everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4).

### 3. We are to be merciful

God also expects the people of God to be merciful. That's us. God expects US to be merciful to our enemies. This was the part of the picture that Jonah never seemed to accept. Here's what the text says:

**4**But [the fact that the Assyrians repented] was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country?

That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. <sup>3</sup>And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' <sup>4</sup>And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' <sup>5</sup>Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

<sup>6</sup> The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. <sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' <sup>10</sup>Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup>And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

God's mercy provided a bush to grow over Jonah because God cared about his COMFORT. Therefore, Jonah should have had empathy for the lives of children, women, men and animals of Nineveh, even though they were enemies. God was trying to TEACH Jonah to be merciful, as God is merciful.

God is trying to teach each one of us the same thing: ...to be merciful as GOD is merciful. Why? Because sooner or later, each of us is going to need mercy; if not now, then CERTAINLY at the Final Judgment. And God knows that we cannot have mercy from God if we refuse to have mercy for others.

That is why Jesus says (Luke 6:37, 38): "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup>give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.' .....

## Conclusion – Forgiving our country’s enemies

I was a freshman in college when the draft lottery was held. Some of you may remember the draft lottery. Every day in the year was given a number and then the numbers were drawn. Men with low numbers were drafted and most went to Vietnam. Mine just happened to be a high number.

Many people I knew served in Vietnam. None came back the same. Some died. One lost an arm. Some, like my friend Kenny, who was seriously wounded three times, came home emotionally dysfunctional. Most came home hating, “The Gooks”, which is what they called the Communist Vietnamese. For what they did to my friends, at the time, I hated them too.

But recently I read about some guys who fought in Vietnam who went back. They saw the fields where they fought that were now productive rice patties. They got to know some of the people who had, perhaps, been enemies and they even shared meals with them.

One guy who went said, “They killed my buddies and they tried to kill me. I tried to kill them. But now I see they’re just people trying to make a life for themselves and their families, just like me.” ...I sensed forgiveness in those words. Mercy if you will. And I realized that I, too, had to forgive my enemies. So I have.

Jesus says (Luke 6:32, 33, 35, 36): “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, do good ...expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

We should never condone or excuse the evil acts of those who have been enemies of our country. Nor should the sacrifice of those who served our country in the military ever be diminished. But, somehow in the mix, we each need to forgive our country’s enemies. Why? Because if WE want mercy from God, and sooner or later we WILL need that mercy, then we, too, must be merciful. ...Amen.