

# Life in Harmony

## Jonah 4

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I have lived in Northwest Indiana for over 20 years now. The past 3-4 years has been different from other years, with a huge influx of former Illinois residents. I meet them nearly every week as they seek to establish a new home, and many are looking for a new church. If that's you, welcome.

One thing you may not realize in moving to Northwest Indiana is that you are moving into one of the most diverse communities in the country.

### Lake County, Indiana Demographics<sup>1</sup>

White	262,000
Black/African American	119,000
Latino	94,000
Asian	8,000
Over 70,000 people speak a language other than English at home.	

For a church striving to be a faithful, gospel-preaching, people-loving church in this community, guess what we must be really strong on?

It relates to another calling our church has which is the dignity and worth of every image bearer, even the little ones still in the womb. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*"<sup>2</sup> That includes injustice to a fetus.

The proximity of Right to Life Sunday the last Sunday of January and Black History Month in February led us last year to do a message the first Sunday in February on the biblical truth that lies behind the right to life for the unborn and why race should be no barrier for Christian love. We are doing the same this year and it may be an annual message. Why? A church in Idaho needs a strong culture of loving farmers and a church in Utah needs a great ministry to Mormons and a church in Northwest Indiana needs to be awesome at multi-racial love and gospel ministry. Multi-ethnic ministry.

Our text today is Jonah chapter 4. Next week we are back in Romans and beginning the wonderful chapter 12, "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.*" (Romans 12:1 ESV) It's going to be great.

Jonah 4. Many of us are familiar with Jonah. It is a whale of a story. My daughters love for me to tell this story at bedtime. I never tell them chapter 4. Probably because I'm getting sleepy too. But just in case you don't know the story of Jonah 1-3, here is a very quick summary.

God tells Jonah to go to the leading city—Ninevah—of arguably the most vile, ruthless, and scary people who have ever lived—the Assyrians. Their brutality is notorious still. They would literally skin alive those whom they conquered. Pile up the bodies. Terrible atrocities. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell them God is going to destroy them if they don't

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics taken from United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov/quickfacts](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts), 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963.

repent. Jonah sensed in the message the possibility that God might NOT destroy them if they did repent. So, what better way to keep that from happening than to get as far from Nineveh as possible.



Jonah goes the exact opposite direction toward Tarshish (see map above). But he couldn't outrun God. God sends a terrible storm and to save the ship, Jonah is cast into the sea. As he is sinking, he repents. God sends a very large fish to swallow Jonah and save his life. Ever have an experience that really changes your perspective? Imagine three days in the gullet of a fish. Certainly, it was a miracle and the point of this message is not to debate it. Jonah repents. The fish vomits him on shore (a favorite moment for my daughters). Jonah heads to Nineveh and declares the coming judgment from God. The whole city repents including the king. They repent. God relents. Jonah is one of the most successful preachers/prophets ever. He must be thrilled. We pick it up in 4:1—

*"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jonah 4:1-4)*

What? This was perhaps the biggest revival in biblical history and the prophet is upset? Jonah tips his cards and we see what was behind his flight to Tarshish,

*"O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." (Jonah 4:2)*

In other words, his theology made him do it. It's great theology! Jonah was spot on, and well aware of the tendency of God to show mercy when judgment was required. He didn't want one Ninevite to get mercy, he wanted them to get hell. They repent. God relents. Good news, right Jonah? Wrong. He is so upset he wants to die. God's response is to probe Jonah's heart with a series of three questions. Questions are powerful. I heard this recently, *Questions prick the conscience, accusations harden the heart.*

*"Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city." (Jonah 4:5)*

That must have been a difficult walk. Apparently, God had forgiven them, but the 40 days hadn't passed yet. So, Jonah heads out of the city, people everywhere. As he goes, Jonah is a celebrity of sorts and Ninevites are thanking him for coming. *Your sermon was amazing. Changed my life. Pray for me. We are so thankful for you! When is your book coming out?* Pastors love to hear that and some of you should perhaps follow their lead. But pure torture for a guy who wanted to see them destroyed. They love him. He hates them.

He goes east of the city to wait and see for sure what will happen. *Maybe God will hear my complaint and decide to blow them up anyway.*

*"Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:6-8)*

God keeps sending things Jonah's way. He sent him a mission. He sent a storm. He sent a fish. Here he sends a fast-growing leafy plant. It grows at Jack-in-the-beanstalk speed and the next day his little hacienda is wonderfully shaded. Jonah loves the plant. He's a happy prophet awaiting and hoping for the destruction of the people in his mission field.

But then God sends a worm that eats and kills the plant. The sun rises there in the dry desert heat of the Middle East. You've seen pictures and video of Iraq in the heat. US soldiers all comment on the incredible furnace it is. That's the furnace Jonah's in. Now with no plant, no shade, he's faint, and for the second time wants to die. God asks a second question.

*"But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?' And he said, 'Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.'" (Jonah 4:9)*

Jonah has no idea that God is using this plant as an object lesson for Jonah. He loves the plant and hates its destruction. God loves people. Jonah is about his plant. God is about his people.

*"And the LORD said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'" (Jonah 4:10-11)*

The Lord could not have shown the smallness of Jonah's heart as any smaller and his own heart for people as any bigger. Did you catch his point? All this emotion, all this drama, all this sorrow. Why, Jonah? For a plant. Now, what is the value of a plant? Jonah what did you do to produce the plant? How long had you even known the plant? A few hours.

What about Nineveh? 120,000 people. The phrase *"who cannot tell their right hand from their left"* is debated. Is it 120,000 children? Most likely means this city has 120,000 people who are spiritually in darkness. They are directionless. Utterly lost. God is turning Jonah's anger back on himself. You were concerned for a plant that you didn't do anything to produce and which you have known for only a few hours. Your concern for the plant was only self-interest and look at your response when it's destroyed.

Now what about Nineveh? *120,000 people. 120,000 image bearers. I have watched their city grow. I created every single Ninevite. I know them all by name, I know every hair on their head. I have tended to Nineveh for these years. My heart longs for these people. Their worth is FAR greater than the plant. You care about a plant; I care about a city.*

And the book ends with this question, *Should I not be concerned about that great city?* This was another way of God saying to Jonah, shouldn't you be concerned about that great city too? And that's it. We don't know how Jonah responded. Did he get it? Did he repent? We know nothing. And it is this haunting conclusion that serves as our question today, *if I am so concerned for the lost Ninevites of the world, why aren't you?*

What does this have to do with abortion, racism, bigotry, and sexism, even things like the #MeToo movement? What does this have to do with seeing our Nineveh through the eyes of God? The world tries to answer these problems and I'll leave it to you to judge how well that's going. Christianity offers a truth solution very different from our society. Our society tries to create morality around these issues devoid of God which strips humans of an inherent worth. Human rights without human image-bearing.

Christianity grounds those moral choices in foundational beliefs about the value of human life. Because God is the highest value and our Creator, our image bearing has a derived worth from whose image we bear. Therefore, murder is wrong because it ends the life of an image-bearer. Violence is wrong because it does damage to an image-bearer.

Christianity says all human life, no matter where it is, in the womb or in hospice, is to be treasured. That is why we very openly advocate for the life of the unborn and see abortion as morally wrong. This is why we actively support local ministries like The Women's Center which provides holistic care for children and their mothers. Our church collectively supports them, and I encourage individuals to as well. This is why you're going to hear about a new initiative we're doing in the coming weeks called Safe Families—helping children whose families are in dire situations with short-term care. You'll hear more about that later.

The story of Jonah undergirds our beliefs about the unborn, but more explicitly addresses the racial issue. Let me point out...

## **Two Difficult Truths as Seen in the Book of Jonah**

### **God often delights to save people we dislike and disagree with**

Apparently, Jonah was a pretty good theologian. What can we say about the Assyrians? Their religion was pure paganism. We would expect a revival like this to happen in Jerusalem, where the Torah was taught and known. Theologically, there could be no more different people on the planet from Jonah than the Assyrians. Yet God delighted to bring revival to Nineveh.

If you are a Republican, how would you feel about a massive revival at the Democratic National Convention this summer? Or if you are a Democrat, what if God chose to work in a powerful revival at the Republican National Convention? If you are a Bears fan, what if revival broke out at Lambeau field? *Now pastor, we draw the line there!* Here's what's true:

## God often delights to save people different from us

When God works or saves or blesses people different from us, do we resent it? Jonah did. He didn't want God's grace poured on the Ninevites. At his heart, Jonah was a spiritual racist. We don't want people like them getting God's grace. Why? They were racially different from the Jews. Spiritually different. Culturally different. No, not them!

But we side with the wideness of God's mercy and love. He cared for Nineveh. He knew how many lived there. He knew their need and sent Jonah with the message they needed.

So here we are, a local church in a community of ethnic diversity, language diversity, and a history of racial tensions and distrust. Jonah 4 directly challenges us to ask the question, *will we view people like Jonah or like God? Which lens?*

What would Jonah's lens look like? We'd be a church pretty much unto ourselves. We'd cloister. Hunker down. We would definitely care for our children's faith and want to make sure everyone in our church is saved and growing. We maybe wouldn't say it, but subtly we would think our church is the best; that we uniquely deserve special favor from God. Our doctrine is better. Our approach is better. We are better. With the Jonah lens, how does a South Lake County Christian feel when he or she hears yet another black teen is gunned down in Gary? Or another story of a politician's corruption negatively affects the quality of life in a North Lake County community...or, or, or?

Here's one: a white, evangelical Christian hears that Kanye West is now professing Jesus as his Savior? What? A rapper? Married to a Kardashian? God can't save someone like that! That's Jonah.

Last year I spoke on race and used the term "African Americans." Later I received a letter criticizing me for using the term "African Americans." *Why would I do that?* Because as I understand it, that's a preferred term and I do so out of respect, Jonah. By the way Jonah, can we agree you should be glad the fish wasn't a racist?

Pastor Dave Stone shared what happened when an African American family joined his friend's church in Louisville in the 1980s. Shortly after the family joined, the wife began attending some of the women's events. After one of the meetings, a member innocently said to her, *"Margaret, it's so good to have you. I don't want to say the wrong thing, so tell me, do you prefer to be called African American, Black, or Negro?"* Margaret looked at her and smiled. *"I think I'd just like to be called Margaret."*<sup>3</sup> People, NOT labels. People, NOT stereotypes.

*"The truth is that there is no black race—and there is no white race. So the idea of "racial reconciliation" is a false idea. It's a lie. It implies that there is more than one race. This is absolutely false. God created only one race—the human race."* (John Perkins)<sup>4</sup>

God cares for the human race in all of its beautiful diversity. The lens we must have must be God's, not Jonah's. As Jesus bore humanity's sin on the cross, he was personally bearing sin across all the ethnicities. White sin. Black sin. Latino sin. Asian sin. Indian sin. Jesus was no racist; he willingly bore the sin of every skin color of humanity. That's how God sees it. That's how God sees us.

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<sup>3</sup> Story related by Dave Stone as quoted by John Perkins, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> John Perkins, *Ibid.*, p. 17.

## Repent/Renew Love and Compassion for Every Image Bearer

If you've been raised seeing skin color instead of seeing people, repent of it. Confess it to God. Ask God to help you see Ninevites as people worthy of divine love and care.

*"Decide to love those whom God loves. But realize as long as there is some self-righteousness clinging to your souls, we may be emboldened to think that God is too generous to those people we, for whatever prejudicial reason, have decided are more worthy of his wrath than we."<sup>5</sup>*

That is easier to do generally than to do personally. It's easier to decide to love Nineveh than it is to love a Ninevite. Do you have a Ninevite in your life? Someone different from you in a category important to you? Neighbor? Coworker? You would much prefer them fired or transferred. Perhaps you've prayed for that. *God, take this Ninevite out of my life.* You are sitting in the shade hoping for wrath to come down on them. How about loving the person different from you?

## Support the Dignity of Human Life Everywhere it is Found

My observation is that there are many Christians who think abortion is a terrible sin but practice a subtle prejudice. In most churches, you will never hear jokes about abortion. But racial jokes among some are viewed as funny. I hope that we would hear racial jokes like someone joking about an abortion. The two are tied together.

*"These two issues [abortion and racism] are about God and about the nature of man created in the image of God. What we believe about God and his majesty, and what we believe about the meaning of being human in relation to God will make all the difference in the world how we think and act about abortion and racism – if we really believe what we say we believe."* (John Piper)<sup>6</sup>

Racism refuses to give honor to someone different from me. Prejudice does the same. But the gospel calls us out of our petty perspectives into the global love of Christ and his work to save people from every tribe, tongue, and language. It is deeply gratifying to me to see our church stretching into the African American community of Gary and the Asian-American community around us. We are hoping for a Latino-focused congregation as part of *More and Better* maybe this year. Why? God loves diversity in unity. This is our Nineveh. Let's not sit in the shade and root for judgment. Let's stay in the city and keep preaching a living message of God's grace and mercy and reconciliation with God and each other.

We don't need less diversity. We need more unity in diversity. That's what heaven will be, so we better start to like the idea now. God delights in it. So should we.

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<sup>5</sup> Source Unknown.

<sup>6</sup> John Piper as quoted by Justin Taylor, "Piper's Preaching on the Abortion and Race Connection," [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org), March 6, 2010.