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**The Book of Jonah**  
**III. A Second Chance**  
**Jonah 3:1-10**

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Winn Collier is an Episcopalian priest, teacher, and writer, who has written a beautiful little book entitled, Love Big, Be Well. I'd call it a novel – in that it consists in a number of letters from a fictional pastor to his fictional congregation. But you would think it is non-fiction, because these letters ring so true – both to the experience of being a pastor and to the experience of life among the fellowship of the church. I highly recommend it to you.

Anyway, in one of these letters, the pastor is mulling over something he once heard a good teacher of the faith say, that “*God is too busy delighting in us to be disappointed in us.*” The pastor is really unsure what to make of that statement. “*On the one hand,*” he writes to his congregation, “*when God endures our vitriol and violence, the ways we heap shame on each other, how we use God’s name to enact (or cover) pure evil – surely God feels something like disappointment, maybe even grief.*” On the other hand, he ponders, “*Doesn’t the story we cling to tell us how God’s love refuses to be extinguished, ever?*”<sup>1</sup>

And that thought leads him to a story one of his congregation members, Don Brady, had told him about how he had come to faith somewhat late in mid-life:

*Don Brady told me that on his road toward faith, all the bells and whistles went off for him during yet another conversation with Amy [Quitman, another member of the church]. (Apparently they had quite a few of these talks.) You may remember this from one of the times Don has shared bits of his story. Amy stopped by Tom Felton’s Garage to have new tires mounted, and Don happened to be there with his red Kawasaki Voyager up on the lift, tinkering with his two-wheeled baby and irritating Tom, as he loves to do. When Tom had to take a phone call, Don saw Amy alone in the customer lounge and joined her. Eternal questions must have been sitting right near the surface for him, because they were barely past hellos before they found themselves in deep waters. Don has been candid with all of us about his past – his rough marriages, his estrangement from his daughter. “I know what you folks say about God’s love covering everything,” he told Amy. “It would have to be a big, big love for me.”*

*Amy nudged closer to Don and put her arm around his shoulders, as far as she could stretch. And then she just sat there, quiet. Don told me he looked around nervously, certain everyone was watching, and he remembers Julio Iglesias crooning “Mona Lisa” over the speaker system. “I felt awkward,” Don said, “but I also felt something else. I think I’d call it joy.”*

*Amy sat there for a while longer before speaking. Finally she said, “It’s big, Don. [God’s] love is really big.”<sup>2</sup>*

“It would have to be a big, big love . . .” And it is. “[God’s] love is really big.” That’s what Jonah learned last week, there in the belly of the whale – that God’s love is even big enough to save a wretch like Jonah. One scholar jokes that the only one happier about Jonah leaving the belly of the whale was the whale itself – Jonah’s sour spirit producing a rather unpleasant three-day tummy ache for the poor whale. But Jonah, finally, coming to his senses and confessing his sin, discovers the bigness of God’s love. That God’s love **is** bigger than any sin we can commit. “*Salvation belongs to the Lord!*”<sup>3</sup> Jonah cries just before the whale deposits him on dry land. And the Apostle John may well have been describing Jonah’s experience in the belly of the whale when he writes, in his first letter: “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*”<sup>4</sup> Amazing grace. Big, big love.

Which makes me think of two further quotes on this theme, if you will bear with me. The first quotation comes from David Ford, who is another wonderful writer on the Christian experience. He once asked a Catholic priest what the most common problem was that he had encountered when hearing parishioners’ sins in the confessional. Without hesitation, the priest answered, “*God!*” God was the biggest problem. He then elaborated, saying that very few of the parishioners he meets with in the confessional booth believe that God is a God of love, forgiveness, and compassion. Rather they see God as Someone who is angry with them all the time, Someone just waiting for the opportunity to punish them – Someone, in other words, who is not at all like Jesus. Responding to this, Ford comments that the graciousness of God, God’s big, big love for us, “*is perhaps the hardest truth of any to grasp. Do we wake up every morning amazed that we are loved by God?*”<sup>5</sup> The second quote picks up on that same theme. Frederick Buecher writes:

*Turn around and believe that the good news that we are loved is gooder than we ever dared hope, and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all glad things in this world the gladdest thing of all.<sup>6</sup>*

God’s amazing grace. God’s big, big love for all His people, for each one of His people. That is what Jonah learned last week in the belly of the whale. In fact, that’s finally what the whole book of Jonah is all about. The whole reason God sends Jonah to Nineveh in the first place is so that the Ninevites, like Jonah, will be given a chance to repent and to come to learn that same amazing grace and big, big love of God.

Which brings us to this morning’s story. God, having rescued Jonah from out of the belly of the whale, now sends Jonah again to preach to the people of Nineveh. As Jonah stands there on

the shore, still wiping away the whale goo, I am guessing, God calls to Jonah a second time, offering him a second chance to get it right: “*Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’*” And this time, you better believe, this time Jonah heads out immediately in the right direction.

In other words, this morning Jonah learns something more about God’s grace, God’s big, big love – that it not only seeks to save us, but also to put us to work as agents of that amazing grace, that big, big love. God saves us not just for the sake of ourselves, but also for His own sake – and so for the sake of those who do not yet know His grace and His love. We are saved, not just because we are loved, but also so that God can put us to work sharing that love of His with others.

Eugene Peterson comments that the root meaning of the Hebrew word for “salvation” is to be broad, to become expansive, to enlarge – which is a perfect description of what God’s amazing grace and big, big love is seeking to accomplish in this world. God wants His salvation to broaden out into all the earth, to expand into every land and every people and every person. Writes Peterson, “*There is a reckless indiscriminateness about salvation. There are no fine distinctions about who or what or when – the whole lost world is invaded, infiltrated, beckoned, invited, wooed: ‘for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.’*”<sup>7</sup> God’s amazing grace, His big, big love is intended to reach each individual, every land, every people – even terrible sinners like the people of Nineveh. And so God doesn’t just save us for ourselves – He saves us in order that we, like Jonah, might join Him in His purpose and plan to save others, to save all. And so Jonah goes to Nineveh, that great and wicked city.

And you just have to love what happens next. Jonah certainly doesn’t – but that is part of the fun. Jonah, saved and sent, is nonetheless still a most unhappy and reluctant missionary – still in the running for the title of “Worst Prophet Ever.” So he barely even enters into Nineveh, does nothing the way a good prophet would do to get the people’s attention. He just walks a little way into the city, delivers his message in a rather haphazard and indifferent fashion – “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*” Which, by the way, is all that he says. He doesn’t say anything at all about the amazing grace and big, big love of God which has just saved him. He just yells out – five words in the Hebrew – He just yells out, “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” Then turns around and heads out of the city., having done the least that he possibly could for God and for Nineveh.

And what happens next? What is the result of Jonah’s half-hearted, unwilling, even hostile proclamation? The single greatest revival in the history of the world. Not even Billy Graham on his best day was as successful as Jonah on that day. From the king all the way down to the cattle grazing in the fields, everybody repents and turns to God. And God is so pleased by what He sees that – amazing grace and big, big love – that He spares Nineveh. Jonah was right, salvation truly does belong to the Lord! And you just have to love this outcome – and not just for the sake of the spared Ninevites, but for Jonah’s sake as well. I don’t know who said it first, but I’ve always loved the expression that, “*Only God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick.*”<sup>8</sup> And Jonah, if every anyone, is certainly a crooked stick – even in his obedience. And yet, just look at what God accomplishes through Jonah!

And if God can do something like that through Jonah – the Worst Prophet Ever – just imagine what He can do through you and me and this church. Maybe not so much in terms of scale – God is probably not going to use us to save an entire city with a five word message. But wouldn't it be awesome if He did! But, rather, in terms of reaching others with His amazing grace and big, big love – persons in our lives, in our orbit, who are in need of just precisely that. If God can do this with a crooked stick like Jonah, just imagine what He could do through you, through me, through us together. Remembering, of course, that He has saved us also not just for our own sake, but also for His own, and so therefore for the sake of carrying that same amazing grace and big, big love of His to others around us. If God can do this through Jonah – truly the “Worst Prophet Ever” – what might He be seeking to do, calling us to do, sending us to do through our daily lives?

Here's an example, a small example of just this sort of Jonah thing in our lives. Philip Yancey tells of speaking on the topic of grace at a conference in Toronto. And, at one point, he asked the audience about their own experiences of conveying God's grace to another person. One woman stood up and said:

*“I feel called to minister to telephone marketers. You know, the kind who call at inconvenient hours and deliver their spiel before you can say a word.” Immediately I flashed back to the times I have responded rudely or simply hung up. “All day long these sales callers hear people curse at them and slam the phone down,” she continued. “I listen attentively to their pitch, then I try to respond kindly, though I almost never buy what they're selling. Instead, I ask about their personal life and whether they have any concerns I can pray for. Often they ask me to pray with them over the phone, and sometimes they are in tears. They're people, after all, probably underpaid, and they're surprised when someone treats them with common courtesy.”<sup>9</sup>*

And Yancey, pondering this woman and her ministry, is convicted about how often he misses out on what he calls “possible hinge moments” in his own interactions with marketers and customer service reps and store cashiers and Starbucks baristas – missed “golden opportunities to dispense grace.” And then he asks, “What would it take for church to become known as a place where grace is ‘on tap’?”<sup>10</sup>

If God has saved us, then God also wants to work through us to reach others with His amazing grace and big, big love. And Jonah is our reminder that we don't have to be perfect Christians in order to do so – that God will take whatever we are and whatever gifts we possess in order to use us for His mission and for His glory. And Jonah is our reminder that we don't even have to be particularly good at evangelism for God to work His grace into the life of another person through us. In fact, Jonah is proof that we can even be something of a seriously “crooked stick” human being, saved only by God's amazing grace and big, big love – and that our very crookedness might be just the way God uses us to reach and meet the needs of another crooked, perhaps even broken, soul for grace and love.

Will Willimon, yet another wonderful writer on the Christian experience, tells a story that came to him from a pastor friend – a story about a woman in that pastor’s congregation who had been assaulted one day in her own home. As she struggled in the aftermath of that terrible and traumatic moment of evil, the pastor convinced her to see a counselor. And the counselor convinced her that it might be therapeutic for her to tell her story to someone who was not in her family, and not her pastor. She reported this to her pastor, and he asked her who she was thinking of telling. She answered, “*Sam Smith.*” The pastor was quite startled by this choice, because Sam was a sometimes-recovering alcoholic and nobody’s first pick for anything in the congregation. The pastor just assumed she would pick someone who was a) a woman, given what had happened; and b) someone who was a bit more “together” than Sam. “*Why Sam?*” he asked her. She answered, “*Because Sam has been to hell and back. I think he will know what it has felt like for me to go there. Perhaps he can tell me how he got back.*” And Sam Smith, like us all a crooked-stick of a human being, indeed became for her an instrument of God’s grace drawing for her the straight line into her healing.<sup>11</sup>

*“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’”* And Jonah, himself only moments before saved from his sin by the amazing grace and big, big love of God, did so – reluctantly, half-heartedly, and unhappily. But nonetheless, through Jonah God saved the entire city of Nineveh from their sin and gave to them His salvation. And so, how about us? The amazing grace and big, big love of God has come to us and saved us. Which means that we, like Jonah, are commissioned by God to tell others the good news about the amazing grace and big, big love of God. So that, in the end, everybody will have received that second chance of God’s amazing grace, and big, big love.

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<sup>1</sup> Winn Collier, *Love Big, Be Well* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Collier, pp. 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Jonah 2:9.

<sup>4</sup> I John 1:8-9.

<sup>5</sup> David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 161.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), pp. 153-154.

<sup>8</sup> Often attributed to Martin Luther.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened to the Good News?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), pp. 75-76.

<sup>10</sup> Yancey, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 109-110