

“A God Who Relents”

“God is good all the time. All the time, God is good.” You may know this little phrase, included in a song by Don Moen. Our instinct as believers is to want to believe that, to be able to shout it out, to clap along with the country music beat, God is good all the time!

That is the type of statement which is made possible if you have a Christian worldview. We all have a worldview. Everyone in the world has a way that they see the world. They have a sense of how things ought to be; who is in control of things; who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. What is good; what is evil. You have a worldview too, of course. You have a structure that helps you make sense of a senseless, mixed-up world. In fact, you see, I have just revealed a worldview. I think the world should make sense, and the fact that the world is full of senseless acts of violence reveals my worldview...there is some standard by which people should operate. You could have an opposite worldview, that nothing makes sense, that chaos is normal and to be expected. Nothing should make sense.

But, most of us think the world is under God’s watchful eye, and that God is good all of time and all the time God is good. Jonah thought that too. And then

God asked him to do something that totally messed with his mind, blowing up his worldview, and now, suddenly, his world wasn't making sense because of God!

Let's play a little mind game to try to understand poor Jonah. I want you to imagine a person or group of people that you do not like, that you think are 'evil', or something close to it. Maybe it's the political party opposite of your own. Maybe it is people in another country. Maybe it is someone you used to love, someone you used to work with, or worse, you still do.

OK. You have that person in mind, right? Now, I want you to imagine with me that God has a message for you: first, God loves whoever you are thinking of, and second, God wants you to go tell them that God loves them and wants them to change their ways so he can show them his love.

Do you think God is good all of the time now? Or are you sitting there saying, 'Nope, not doing it. I won't believe God would love them, and he certainly wouldn't want me to love them! I am not doing it.' That's how Jonah got into the belly of a whale, vomited out onto dry land, given a second chance to deliver the message, and now he sits on the hilltop over Nineveh waiting for God to destroy his enemy.

But then, from Jonah's point of view, (SLIDE) Nineveh repented. God relented in his judgment against Nineveh, and now they will not be destroyed. In fact, they listened and heeded Jonah message from God and asked for God to forgive them. And now they would be saved. This made Jonah very angry.

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So, if God sent you to your enemy with a message, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Great message, God, Jonah should think. "Do it, God. Destroy them! They are evil people, torturing our men, raping our women, killing our children, destroy them!" Who among us does not want to say that to whomever you have as your enemy in mind. Take 'em out, God!

Why did Jonah run away? Because he knew God is good all the time and all the time God is good. In Bible words, he knew God's character, (SLIDE) he knew that while God would threaten judgment, that there was a chance God would change his mind. Why? Because he knew what God is like. Do you?

Do you know that God is gracious? God is a God who cares for us in a very personal way. That's what we mean when we say that God cares for the poor, the hungry, the homeless. He is kind.

Do you know that God is compassionate? The word here is from words which describe a mother's womb. In other words, God cares for people like a

mother cares for her children. What wouldn't a mother do for her child? What wouldn't God do for his children?

Did you know that God is slow to anger? God isn't quick to execute judgment, no matter how angry we make God. He controls his anger toward us because he wants us to have time to change.

Did you know that God is abounding in love? God's love, which is also here translated as 'grace' in Hebrew, is also called 'steadfast love.' It is, in the words of another hymn, a 'love that will not let me go.' God's love is constant, overflowing, rich.

Well, Jonah knew all of that. And so, does that make Jonah happy? (SLIDE) Nope. It makes Jonah very angry, and the words here mean he was like furious with God. Why? Because all of those characteristics can be summed up with one phrase: God is a God who relents from sending calamity on God's, and therefore our, enemies. Jonah's worldview was blown up.

God sent Jesus to die on the cross to save sinners, right? We all get that. God so loved the world, right? We all get that too. But then we finally figure out, that means God sent Jesus to save the people I do not like too. And we are the messengers not of judgment but of love.

So, sadly, very sadly, we have a perfect illustration about why it is so important for the church to teach this lesson very carefully. You have heard about the young man who allegedly last week stormed a Jewish synagogue and killed a woman and injured others. He had been taught good theology about God in his church, about salvation. But he had somehow become indoctrinated with the evil thoughts of white nationalism, which teaches their followers to hate Jews and people of color, and, in a spectacularly horrible twist, that God wants them to destroy their 'enemies.'

White nationalism is a worldview which worships an idol, a false god. We know that the God of the Bible, the God who teaches Jonah to reach out to the Israel's enemies; the God who sends his Son to reach out to sinners everywhere, that God loves the Jewish people and people of color. So, we preach that the philosophy of white nationalists is an evil twist on the Word of God, and we preach that God would never, ever want anyone to kill Jews or people of color because of their religious views or their skin color. Why? Because God is good. God is a God who relents.

We all know someone in our lives for whom we want this to be true. Someone who has strayed from God, or maybe not yet found God. You want

them to be found by God; you want God to be gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love toward them, right? We want God to be good to ourselves, to the people we know and love. We need to see that God loves everyone like that.



Maybe that makes you angry. So, God asks you, with Jonah, (SLIDE) is it right for you to be angry? Is your anger making the world a better place? Is your anger bringing people into a loving relationship with God? The next time you are ready to blast someone on Facebook or Twitter stop and ask yourself, 'is this showing the love of a God who relents?'

(SLIDE) So, while Jonah is waiting to see the fireworks destroy the city, God sends a plant to shade Jonah from the searing heat and sun. Jonah loves it. That is grace, and Jonah loves receiving grace. But then God destroys the plant, and now Jonah suffers in the heat. That is judgment. And Jonah is angry all over again.

Jonah loves receiving grace, and he is upset when judgment replaces grace. So, God says, that's how you feel about a plant you didn't make, but I gave you.

(SLIDE) Shouldn't I have concern for the lost people and animals of Nineveh? Shouldn't I give them some shade? Shouldn't I extend grace, rather than judgment to them? Do you see how narrow is your worldview? You want to

receive grace for yourself, in the shade of the tree, but you want me to take away the shade that protects 120,000 people, and their animals?

Now, there's a little shout out to our veterinarians, and all of you who own and care for animals. God loves the animals! God loves all of his creation. As you care for the animals, you are doing God's work of showing them love. Keep it up!

So, the story ends with Jonah sitting on a hillside, the blazing sun in his eyes, the desert heat exhausting him, and God asks him, should God not have concern for Nineveh. The word 'concern' translates a phrase, 'have tears in my eyes.' Should God not have tears in his eyes for your enemy, Jonah? And God asks you the same today, (SLIDE), should God not have concern for your enemy?

The story ends as the camera pulls back, and God whispered question hangs over the final frames of the movie. How will we answer it? The question put to Jonah is one put to us too. And God is waiting for your answer.

The lesson of Easter (SLIDE) is that God's love for creation is beyond our imagination. And it is with that love that we are to love the world. Easter love is to love not just ourselves, our people we love, but our enemies too.

God is good all the time and all the time God is good. Sometimes the way that truth plays out is going to make you angry, but then ask yourself if your response, as a child of God, should be anger or love.



That is the message of this Table in Eastertide: God loves everyone.
Especially you.