

## **Introducing the At-Home eRetreat – “Compassionate God; Angry Prophet”**

*Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh . . . ? – Jonah 4:11*

This is the question God asks Jonah, the question with which God and Jonah have wrestled, on land, at sea, and of course, in the belly of a fish. It is never answered in the book that bears his name, leaving room for us to wrestle with it in our own contexts, and to consider, over the coming five days, who this God is who sent Jonah, and John, and Jesus, and now even us, to extend his mercy.

This 5-day Retreat is a set of readings, reflections, and prayers. The beauty of this structure is that you do not need to literally stay home for a week in order to experience retreat, as it can be hard for many of us to take a week away from our responsibilities. Instead, an eRetreat offers you the opportunity to notice God in the midst of your daily and often busy life. It highlights our desire as God’s people to live more intentionally in God’s presence in the daily rhythms of our lives and to notice and experience his loving touch and word for us as we go about our day and interactions with family, co-workers, classmates, neighbors, and friends. This time enables us to reflect on how God is working his new life into our lives right now, as we wait for the restoration of all things.

Here are some suggestions on how to approach the material each day:

- Set aside daily time to be alone with God in prayer and reflection. How much time is up to you but consider at least 20 minutes.
- Take a moment to prepare for your time with God. Breathe deeply and relax your body. Enjoy the silence. Ask God to reveal himself to you as you read the daily passages and reflection.
- As you read, notice any words or phrases that stand out to you or catch your attention. Take several minutes of quiet to ponder why these words or phrases might be standing out to you. How are they intersecting with your life?
- Use the reflection questions offered to help prompt your conversation with God. If you find it helpful, make a note of questions, comments, or phrases that keep recurring in your mind. Share with God what is stirring in you.
- When you feel finished, take a few minutes to thank God for your time together and close with the Lord’s prayer.

The eRetreat will run from Monday through Friday, beginning December 3. There is a guide for your reflection guide for the day. If you wish to further process the retreat with God and with others, a “Day Apart” will be held at the church on Friday, the 7<sup>th</sup>, from 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. We ask that you sign up in advance at [ramapax@gmail.com](mailto:ramapax@gmail.com) for this day.

May you rest in the assurance of God’s compassionate love for you as you enjoy time with him this week.

*—Provided by the PAX Center for Spiritual Formation*

## Day 1 – Invitation

Preparing: “A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD;  
make straight a highway for our God.” - Isaiah 40:3

Pausing: A time of silence, resting in the presence of God.

Reading: Luke 1:5-17; Jonah 1:1-3

### Reflecting:

In the season of Advent, we celebrate a God who not only cares but acts, who not only creates but comes, who not only speaks but sends. There is, of course, the “grand sending” that focuses this season on the arrival of Jesus, God’s unique, and only Son, the One in whom Christians acknowledge that incredibly, God himself has come to us. But, leading up to that grand sending we find all sorts of “smaller sendings,” the comings and goings of prophets, those whom God particularly sent in advance of Jesus to prepare a people for his coming (Lk. 1:17). John would be the last in the long line of these smaller sendings that came before Jesus.

One who was a part of this long line was a prophet named Jonah. Following on the heels of the great prophetic voices of Elijah and Elisha, Jonah was called by God to continue to speak his word during the reign of an Israelite king named Jeroboam II (786-746 BC). But the primary ministry of Jonah we are told about did not have to do with going to the Israelites. Rather, Jonah was sent to the Ninevites. Jonah not only refused the invitation to go; he ran the other way as fast as he could!

In many ways, it’s not surprising. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, one of the cruelest and most violent empires of ancient times. It could have been called, in today’s terminology, a “terrorist state.” Not only would it have been a frightening place to do ministry, but Jonah must have wondered, why bother sharing the word of God there? Jonah was a patriotic Israelite through and through. These evil people, he must have reasoned, didn’t deserve mercy, they deserved judgment. Why give them another chance?

We’ll see how God and Jonah wrestle with this and work it through in the days ahead. For now, know that the smaller sendings haven’t really stopped with the arrival of Jesus. In fact, Jesus has continued them. At the beginning of his earthly ministry he gathers a group of fishermen and says to them, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men and women.” Then, when their learning has become sufficient and he is about to leave them, he sends them out, saying, “Go, and make (more) disciples . . .” (Ma. 4:18-20; 28:18-20). We are included in this sending invitation, in this following and learning and going.

1. How do you feel about being called to be among those whom God is sending?
2. What if your going was not far away but simply around the corner to a neighbor, or to your place of work, or to the gym? What could make you run the other way?
3. What learning might you still need to do to prepare to go?
4. What if God assured you that he would be going with you?

### Praying:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, thank you for being a God who has cared enough to come to us and begin to make new all that has become broken in your good and wonderful creation. Begin with my heart. Widen it enough that I would rejoice in your sending invitation, to be included in your ministry of making things whole. Give me the courage to go where I sense you are sending me. Help me to know the empowering presence of your Spirit who goes with me.

## Day 2 - Storm

Preparing: Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. – Isaiah 40:4

Pausing: A silent time of resting in the presence of God.

Reading: Luke 1:18-25; Jonah 1:4-16

### Reflecting:

As we will see, Jonah ran the other way from God's call because he didn't think God's mercy should extend to the enemies of God's people. While God would still have a thing or two to say to Jonah about that, the results of Jonah's disobedience were immediate and dramatic. God sent such a violent storm upon the sea that even the seasoned sailors were shook. The storm was interrupting the lives of these men, as they would soon interrupt the sleep of Jonah.

Tim Keller observes in his work on Jonah, *The Prodigal Prophet*, that the Bible does not attribute every difficulty to the cause of sin, but it does teach that every sin will bring you into difficulty. All sin has a storm attached to it. Sin, OT scholar Derek Kidner adds, "sets up strains in the structure of life which can only end in breakdown." It doesn't always, or even often, come rushing upon us as a storm, but if not dealt with, sin can eventually immobilize us. Sometimes, like the sailors, the storms are not our fault but come upon us because we, as human beings, are all "in the same boat;" what we do has a profound effect on others, and vice versa. Desmond Tutu calls this common humanity that we share *ubuntu*, which means something like "bound up together in the bundle of life."

No matter how they come, storms can serve to awaken us to our need to reach out for the God who is there, waiting to hear from us. Not only do we hear these sailors waking up to the LORD, calling out to Jonah's God for rescue and offering him their worship (a true irony given this was the opposite from what Jonah desired for his pagan neighbors), we also see Jonah waking up to the desperate need of the sailors. His instructions that they should toss him overboard, taking the full wrath of the waves upon himself so that the sailors could go free, reflects the pattern of substitutionary love that Jesus would embody in a much fuller sense, centuries later.

This same Jesus, it is instructive to note, was also found asleep in a boat during a great storm by sailors who were his disciples. Waking him up, they feared for their lives (Ma. 8:23-27). Calming the storm with a word, Jesus would later go on to reveal that with his arrival, "one greater than Jonah" had come (Ma. 12:41). While Jonah went under the water and came near to death, Jesus went under the weight of our sin, actually died under its punishment, and then rose to life again. As one in a long line of prophets who prepared people for the coming of the Lord, Jonah also served as a type of what Jesus would eventually do as he pointed to the kind of love Jesus would pour out for us to cleanse us from our sin, calm the waters of our anxious and guilt-ridden soul, and get us moving in the right direction.

1. Is there a storm of sin in your life that is preventing you from moving forward?
2. Would you call out to God, trusting that if you confess to him, God is faithful and just and will forgive your sins and purify you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)?
3. Is there someone from whom you need to ask forgiveness? Is someone you need to forgive?

Praying: Gracious God, my sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Enable me to cry out and make way for you in my heart, that I may receive the forgiveness you so freely offer. Thank you for rescuing me from the storms of my own making. Lead me daily beside the still and quiet waters of your love, that I may seek the forgiveness of others and forgive as I have been forgiven. Amen.

### Day 3 - Grace

Preparing: “See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.” – Isaiah 40:10

Pausing: A time of silent rest in God’s presence.

Reading: Luke 1:57-66; Jonah 1:17-2:10

#### Reflecting:

Remarkably, as soon as Jonah splashes into the water, the arm of the LORD reaches out and rescues him, gathering him into the belly of a huge fish where he remained for three days and nights. Is this possible? How could we know? Keller suggests that the only way we could possibly know is if Jonah told others. And, what kind of man would let the world know what kind of angry, arrogant fool he had been but one who had, finally (after the end of this book) become joyfully secure in God’s compassionate grace?

This is the God who rescued Jonah. This is also the God whom Jonah did not trust to bring about what Jonah thought was the righteous judgment due the wicked Ninevites. But God is determined that Nineveh will hear the good news. Not only that, God is determined to extend his grace and compassion to the Ninevites through Jonah. By sticking with Jonah, God had some things he evidently wanted to teach him about the nature and reach of his mercy.

First, Jonah must experience that compassion for himself. Like a football pass that is intercepted on the goal line, preventing an opponent from scoring the winning touchdown, God “intercepts” Jonah right before his death and returns him to the victory of life. Reflecting on this experience, Jonah recalls that he was “deep in the realm of the dead,” threatened by engulfing waters, with seaweed wrapped around his head, having sunk all the way down to the roots of the mountains where it felt like his life was ebbing away. Most often, this bottom place in our lives is where we begin to experience God’s grace—God’s undeserved favor. God intercepts us from what we deserve and showers us with love and compassion. Jonah’s rebellion had brought him down; God’s mercy would raise him up.

Now, there is much discussion about what seems like an absence of confession and repentance by Jonah in his prayer. Jonah certainly cries out to God, acknowledging his need for God to rescue him. And he declares that this God is the source of salvation. But, well might we wonder, does Jonah deserve it? Reading to the end of the story and finding Jonah still stewing in his anger, we might think not. At the same time, well might we be grateful! For, none of us deserves God’s rescue. And, once rescued, how many of us turn immediately into the kind of person God desires us to be? For Jonah, as for us, he still had some old skin to shed. A journey still lay ahead, a journey deeper into the heart of our God so that he can make us vehicles of his mercy. It’s a journey on which this God teaches us the boundless nature of his compassion, a compassion that extended to pagan sailors, pagan Ninevites, an angry Israelite prophet, and to you and to me.

1. How have you experienced God’s undeserved favor in your life? What has God “intercepted” you from?
2. What parts of your “old skin” still need to be shed so that you can live your new life in Christ?
3. In what ways is the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, Jonah from the fish, and Jesus from the tomb, helpful or encouraging to you?

Praying: God of mercy and grace, I pray that you will continue your work of re-formation in my life, making me into a new creation. Reveal to me what is good. Enable me to guard against and put off what is evil. May my life, and our community of faith, know and reveal in deeper ways your compassionate and merciful heart. Amen.

## Day 4 – Invasion

Preparing: “You who bring good tidings to Zion...lift up your voice with a shout...  
Say to the towns of Judah, Here is your God!” - Isaiah 40:9

Pausing: Enjoy a time of silence in God’s presence.

Reading: Luke 1:67-80; Jonah 3

### Reflecting:

Chapter 3 of Jonah begins with God, after unceremoniously releasing Jonah from the fish, rewinding the plot and beginning again. The word of the LORD comes to Jonah a second time, and for a second time Jonah is instructed by God to go to Nineveh and proclaim the message of the LORD. Jonah was well willing to proclaim to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” But he was not so keen on declaring the same to the great city of Nineveh. Yet, how else were they to hear?

One of the great truths of the advent season is that in Christ, God invades our world. He comes to us because we cannot, in the midst of our sin, come to him. Our lives are filled with competing desires and seemingly endless demands, and our world is filled with violence, hatred, and oppression. Unless God breaks through, we are doomed. The shocking thing about this chapter is not that it describes God breaking through, but that the ones to whom he breaks through are the enemies of his people. God’s people were looking for salvation from such enemies but instead, God instructed Jonah to bring salvation for these enemies.

God’s grace is persistent, both to Jonah and to the Ninevites, and his word is powerful. While the extent and the nature of the change that took place within the Ninevites is not altogether clear, we do read that they turned from their evil ways enough that at this point in their history, God did not bring on them the disaster he had threatened. God acted, in other words, according to his mercy and compassion, even extending such to those outside of the borders of Israel. How did this happen? The most we can say is that as Jonah spoke God’s word, the Spirit of God used his testimony to pierce the consciences of his hearers. Hearts were changed as God moved through his word. As one commentator puts it, “From the king on the throne to beast in the field, Nineveh was filled with a spirit of penitence” (Sinclair Ferguson). Through the preaching of Jonah, “the Ninevites believed God” (3:5).

The invasion of God into enemy territory takes place in a rather unusual way: “The word of God is alive and active,” the author of Hebrews explains, “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). It penetrates our hearts as we read it, and it penetrates the hearts of others as we then share it. That it penetrated the hearts of the Ninevites is without question. How much further it had to go into Jonah’s heart we will ponder tomorrow. For now, how has God’s word penetrated your heart?

1. What is your relationship with the message (v. 2)? How are you making space for God’s word to penetrate your heart?
2. How have you experienced God’s persistent grace in your life? Are there things God has asked you to do a second (or a third, or . . .) time?
3. Are you willing to take God’s message into “enemy territory?” Where would that be?

### Praying:

Heavenly Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Work your word deep within my being, that I may grasp how wide and long and deep your love is, for me, and for others. May I trust in the power of your word for my enemies. May it be the sword that I wield.

## Day 5 – Glory

Preparing: “And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.” – Isaiah 40:5

Pausing: Enjoy a time of silent rest in God’s presence.

Reading: Luke 3:1-6; Jonah 4

### Reflecting:

What is Jonah’s reaction to the mercy of God? Rather than rejoice, Jonah gets angry, very angry, so angry that he’d rather die than watch the Ninevites live. Jonah stomps off and builds himself a little shelter. From this shady, private retreat, he can keep an eye on the city, presumably to see if the Ninevites will persevere in their repentance. But “anger,” as one clever saying puts it, “is one letter away from danger.”

To be sure, God had promised that he would work out his purposes for the world through his people Israel. But how could he do this, Jonah wondered, while showing mercy to Israel’s enemies instead of punishing them for bad behavior? Jonah was struggling, it seems, with the contradiction he saw between love and justice. Even more, in his overwhelming love for his own people, Jonah was in danger of patriotism gone awry, and bordering on racism and imperialism. Tim Keller sums this up well, and soberly, noticing how much Jonah’s identity had become rooted in his race and nationality, rather than in being a reconciled sinner who was a child of the King and a citizen of the kingdom:

While love of country and your people is a good thing, like any other love, it can become inordinate. If love for your country’s interests leads you to exploit people or, in this case, to root for an entire class of people to be spiritually lost, then you love your nation more than God. That is idolatry, by any definition. [The Prodigal Prophet, 103]

While Jonah watches and boils, God engages him in a counseling session he will never forget. It involved a series of questions and a parable from nature to help him try to get at the root of his anger. The plant which grew up assisted in providing Jonah with shade while he watched, and while he and God conversed. It was pure gift, yet, when God saw fit to take it away, Jonah seemed to get even angrier. Jonah cared for the plant. How much more was God concerned about the Ninevites, who were entrapped in their sinful lifestyles and didn’t know how to get out? “Salvation,” as even Jonah recognized, “comes from the LORD” (2:9). This same LORD desires all people to see, and benefit from, his salvation.

The whole episode funnels down to this question: What is God really like? And flowing from it: Given what God is like, what should we be like? We never hear Jonah’s answer, which allows the question to linger for us. As writer Janet Gaines puts it: “It is primarily the reader on whom God’s final words land, the reader who is left to ponder their meaning, the reader who must decide what action to take next.”

1. Does God’s mercy ever make you angry? Why, or why not?
2. What prejudices are in danger of surfacing when we put a nation ahead of the kingdom of God?
3. How might the church be able to guard against patriotism, and/or “America first” attitudes becoming idolatry?
4. How would you answer the question with which the book ends?

Praying: Move us, compassionate God, to know your grace in the depth of our hearts. Help us to see how your love and justice come to focus in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to whom Jonah points. May the glory Jesus revealed in his life radiate in our own, that we might put your kingdom above all things and live out the wideness of your mercy.