

“Who Knows?”
Jonah 3:1-10
06.20.21

Introduction

Pastor and author Martin Thielen talks about beginning a new pastoral appointment and going to visit an inactive member. During the conversation, he tells the single father that he and the church would love to see him and his children in worship again. The man told him that he appreciated the invitation, but that he no longer believed in God. The pastor writes,

‘Tell me about the God you don’t believe in,’ I said. So he told me his story. Years earlier, he, his wife, and their two young children came to church every Sunday. But then his wife developed breast cancer. In spite of all their prayers and the best medical treatment available, she only got worse. He begged God to save her, but she died anyway. ‘I don’t believe in a God who kills twenty-eight-year-old mothers with cancer.’ I replied, ‘I don’t believe in that kind of God either.’¹

What kind of God do you believe in?

Or maybe for some of us the question is, “What kind of God do you *not* believe in?”

Digging Deeper

In Jonah chapter three the reluctant prophet goes to Nineveh and announces that in forty days the city will be overthrown. It is enough to evoke a dramatic response. The “king” of Nineveh issues a decree for everyone and everything to repent. He says, “*Who knows?* God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish” (Jonah 3:9, NRSV. Emphasis added).

Of course, the king’s question (i.e., “who knows?”) is meant to be understood rhetorically, but I’ve always sensed a tinge of irony. The people of Nineveh *should* know about the God of Israel, but the prophet of God has withheld some important information. If you read Jonah this week, you may have noticed that his message to the Ninevites is rather short (“forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown”). In Hebrew it is only four words. It is clear that Jonah does not say anything more than the bare minimum.

It is clear when we get to the final chapter that Jonah does *knows*. While he is sitting east of the city he says, “...*I knew* that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2, NRSV). The irony is that Jonah knows enough about God that he wants to be careful not to say too much, otherwise, the people of Nineveh might experience God’s love.

¹ M. Thielen, *What’s The Least I Can Believe and Still Be A Christian?*, pp. 7-8

Theological Reflection

This passage makes me wonder about all of the people in our community and in our lives who are asking similar questions. Maybe it is in a different form, but people are asking questions like, “Does my life matter?” “Is there any purpose to my life?” “When will my suffering end?” “Am I all alone? Is there a God? Does God care about me?”

And at the same time, so many of the people around us are living with negative assumptions and presuppositions about who God is—like that God kills 28-year-old mothers with cancer. At the end of these questions, I can’t help but add a “Who knows?”

Like Jonah, you and I are the mouthpiece of God. It’s not that we have a corner on truth or that we have all the answers, but we know that God is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

I think our biggest obstacle sometimes is the fear that we won’t be able to answer someone’s questions, but the truth is that no matter how good our answers are, it won’t be our explanation that convinces anyone to believe—it will always be our witness. We believe in God not out of fear of threat, but because God is the source of life. God is love. It is in a relationship with God that our lives are made complete and whole.

And so, as the people of God we should also be asking “*Who knows?*” Do my neighbors know, my friends, my family about this life transforming love? Do the people I work with or encounter on a regular basis know that God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love?

Recently I had an epiphany. Maybe I am behind and I just catching up with everyone else, but the majority of people in our culture are not interested in going to church. We should not be surprised when our friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors decline our invitation. Our strategy is going to have to be different. This week I read a little message that said, “Don’t just invite people to church. Invite them to lunch. Invite them to your table or patio. Invite them into your life! Be there for them. We—not our building—are the church!”

I would include, “Invite them to know.” Extend an invitation for them to have a relationship with the God of life and the God of love.

Invitation

And today I would be remiss if I did not extend the same invitation to you. Do you *know*? Do you know that you are deeply loved and that your life matters to God? Do you know that God is the source of life, love, and hope? Do you know that regardless of who you

are or what you've done you can receive forgiveness and have a new life in Jesus Christ?

The truth is that there are many of us who have grown up in church and we've simply gone through the motions all of our lives. In fact, this is a pretty apt description of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. He was seeking God and felt like he always came up short, until one day he realized that there was nothing he could do to make God love him more, and there was nothing he could do to make God love him less. And that day his heart was strangely warmed. If that is you today, I invite you to simply pray, "God, I give you my life."

Conclusion

If there has ever been in a time in our lives that people have been asking "Who knows?" it is now. May we be their answer. May we let our lights shine and let them know. Amen.

Reference Tools

Bruckner, James. *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*. 2004. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing.

Thielen, Martin. *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* 2013. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your all-time favorite movie/T.V. show?
2. Can you think of a situation, relationship, or conversation you've had in your own life that relates to the story about the man who lost his wife? If so, how did you respond?
3. Are there people in your life who seek you out for spiritual guidance? If not, what do you think you might be able to do differently to create more opportunities and open more doors to share your witness?

4. Who can you invite to church, your table, or your patio? What is one concrete step you can take this summer to build your witness with at least one person?

5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?

6. How can we pray for you this week?