

“When Every Direction Feels Wrong”

September 20, 2026

Jonah 3: 10 to 4: 11

God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn’t do it.

But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, “Come on, Lord! Wasn’t this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, Lord, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live.”

The Lord responded, “Is your anger a good thing?” But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city.

Then the Lord God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, “It’s better for me to die than to live.”

God said to Jonah, “Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?”

Jonah said, “Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!”

But the Lord said, “You ‘pitied’ the shrub, for which you didn’t work and which you didn’t raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Exodus 16: 2-15

The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert. The Israelites said to them, “Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you’ve brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death.”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I’m going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction. On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “This evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And in the morning you will see the Lord’s glorious presence, because your complaints against the Lord have been heard. Who are we? Why blame us?” Moses continued, “The Lord will give you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning because the Lord heard the complaints you made against him. Who are we? Your complaints aren’t against us but against the Lord.”

Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole Israelite community, ‘Come near to the Lord, because he’s heard your complaints.’” As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned to look toward the desert, and just then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

The Lord spoke to Moses, “I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat. And in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.’”

In the evening a flock of quail flew down and covered the camp. And in the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the desert surface were thin flakes, as thin as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” They didn’t know what it was.

Moses said to them, “This is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

*Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Thanks be to God.***

Meditation

For my birthday this year, I received a book called *Something in the Woods Loves You*. Part memoir, part nature writing, author Jarod Anderson writes about his struggle with depression and suicidal ideation and how nature slowly brought him back to himself. Each chapter details slow, deliberate, meditative encounters with animals and plants. In a chapter about the red-tailed hawk, Anderson writes about how depression gripped him so deeply that any change for the better felt impossible. Depression was telling him that it was better to stay with what he knew, even though it was awful, in order to avoid the potential of something worse.

I experienced something like this when I was in my first church call. It was a bad fit for myself and for the church, and I became really cynical about ministry. But the idea of spending time and energy looking for a different church felt too overwhelming. What if I did all the work and ended up in just the same situation – or one even worse? I’d heard enough stories from other young clergywomen that for a good chunk of time, I couldn’t even imagine anything different, much less better.

When we are stuck in those spaces, it can feel like things we don’t want are happening *to* us. That our circumstances are inevitable and there’s nothing we can do about it. It is true that there are a lot of external factors in our lives we can’t control. But we can get to a place where we believe we don’t have *any* agency, or it’s better to not take action. Anderson describes it this way:

An intentional change makes us vulnerable to a vivid brand of disappointment. In the passive mode, we can hold tight to the idea that the future is happening to us. We abdicate responsibility. We don’t steer the ship; we endure as passengers. Life does what it will without asking for our consent. The active mode saddles us with responsibility, with potential blame. If a change we invited sours, then both our fate and our judgement has failed us. We become both the victim and the victimizer, double the hurt and culpability of the passive approach.

And yet, I have come to understand that abdicating my agency is the greater threat. The numb, self-deceiving position that if we don’t earnestly try we can’t actually fail ourselves is not the defense it seems to be. With this mindset, change is the enemy; and we won’t be its accomplice in our inevitable misery.

Except, of course, it isn't actually a decision between change or no change. It isn't actually a decision between choice and choicelessness.

We will act. We will influence our lives. If we do not exercise our agency, our willful choice, and actively seek the change we wish, we are choosing the status quo; and at some point, that uncomfortable truth must be acknowledged. Hope is fearful, but hopelessness does not protect us....

To feel deeply is dangerous.

To do anything else is a tragedy.¹

We've talked about change before – a couple of weeks ago, I talked about the connection between change and discomfort. I've also previously talked about the brain science of change and how our brains view certain kinds of change as a threat. And so, we pretend that the choices we have are between change and no change. But life *is* change.

This resistance is a natural human response, and the characters in both Scriptures today demonstrate a similar resistance. Jonah is unhappy with God's choices and unwilling to adapt to the change in outcome for the Ninevites, so he sits under a bush and waits for death. The book of Jonah ends on a question, and we are left wondering if Jonah will continue to abdicate agency or if he will embrace hope and the conviction that God's mercy extends even to Israel's enemies. The question then haunts us as well – what do we believe about God, and how will it affect our actions?

The Israelites are also stuck, although I tend to sympathize with their grumbling a little more than Jonah's. Over and over again, chapter after chapter, the people in Exodus say, "It would have been better for us to stay in Egypt." We heard it last week as the threat of Pharaoh and his army drew near. We heard it today as they begin to run out of food and are hungry. We will hear it next week when they journey further into the wilderness and there is no water.

I don't want to make light of their situation – in each story, their basic needs are threatened: safety, food, water. Their complaints are not for nothing. But so often, we think that agreeing once to God's plan means the way will be forever clear. We chose to leave Egypt, so why isn't everything suddenly easy?

John Goldingay writes, "they soon discover that God's defeat of Pharaoh by no means solves all their problems. It only introduces them to the next challenge. When God does something new and creative, it is tempting to think that everything now is going to be wonderful, but the early church soon found it was having to deal with people being put in jail and people falsifying their pledges and with one group complaining about another group being neglected when food was distributed. It was repeating Israel's experience, even in the sense that it involved down-to-earth questions like whether you have enough to eat and that it issued in division in the community. Israel complained to Moses and Aaron; one Christian group complained against another."²

¹ Jarod K. Anderson, *Something in the Woods Loves You*, p. 55-56, © 2024

² John Goldingay, *Exodus & Leviticus for Everyone*, p. 69, © 2010

Life is about choosing over and over again to move forward. And usually, when we make one choice, we are suddenly faced with thirty more decisions that have to be made. It can feel easier to let our circumstances choose for us and abdicate our agency. But when we follow God's new and creative plans, it gets messy and we will have to keep chasing the life, the community, the outcome we want.

Sometimes, every direction feels wrong. Back to Egypt or forward without enough food and water? Undeserved mercy in which our enemies flourish or their annihilation? We often find ourselves caught in the middle with no good options. Even when choosing feels impossible, let us boldly step forward, asking for God's guidance.

Octavia Butler writes:

All that you touch
You Change
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God is Change.³

May we meet today's challenges with deep feeling and abiding hope.

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Scripture: *Common English Bible* (CEB) ©2011 by Common English Bible

³ Octavia Butler, Parable of the Sower