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Holy Faith, Santa Fe
20 September 2026

Proper 20 – Year A

Jonah 3.10-4.11

Psalms 145.1-8

Philippians 1.21-30

Matthew 20.1-16

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How many times have you wanted to play God? That's right, play God. You know what I mean! Play God – have complete control over some situation in your life – perhaps in a relationship with a loved one, perhaps in the amount of work you're responsible for at your job or at school, perhaps dealing with a grave illness. We've all wanted to play God at some point in our lives. And we often accuse others of playing God. We hear developers of AI called gods because they are creating intelligence apart from human beings. We hear some say how doctors play God, deciding how much care to provide patients and thus prolong their lives. Of course, we know that doctors are not gods; they are instruments of God's healing power. But this way of speaking, I believe, underscores our frustration when things don't turn out the way we want them to be.

The story of Jonah is a good example of human nature being frustrated when things don't turn out the way we want them to be, and why it's better to let go and let God be God. Jonah is best known for being swallowed by a big fish – popularly known as a whale – and surviving for three days in the fish's belly before being spewed out upon dry land. But that was after the first time God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and call the people to repent for their wickedness. Jonah instead ran from God, hid in a ship

that ran into a storm created by God, was thrown overboard by the sailors to appease God, and ended up in the belly of the fish.

Today's reading from the Old Testament book of Jonah picks up after the second time God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and call the people to repentance for their wickedness, and this time Jonah obeys God. And perhaps more miraculously, at least in terms of responses to Old Testament prophets, the people of Nineveh heed Jonah's call to repentance. We're told that when God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God decided to refrain from bringing the ruin and destruction on them that God had planned for their punishment.

But what was Jonah's response? We're told that God's sparing the people of Nineveh was displeasing to Jonah and he became angry. Why? Basically, Jonah wanted to save face – he'd warned the people of Nineveh that some great calamity was coming, and now that wasn't going to happen. Jonah, rather than being concerned about the fate of more than 120,000 people, was more concerned about his reputation. How's that for human nature?

And what does Jonah say to God? He tells God that's why he ran away from God in the first place – because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Jonah knew that God would not follow through on the threat of punishment and Jonah would look like a fool for predicting the punishment. Jonah takes the hymn of self-praise that the LORD offered to Moses on Mount Sinai and turns it against God by accusing God of being too merciful! But don't we want a God who is gracious and merciful, a God who is slow to

anger, a God abounding in steadfast love, a God who is ready to relent from punishing?
Just think of what kind of god Jonah would be!

But Jonah will not be placated. He runs away from God again to a place overlooking the city, convinced that the people of Nineveh will return to their evil ways. God finds Jonah there – just as God found Jonah hiding in the ship, just as God knows where we are – both physically and spiritually – at all times, and God provides Jonah a bush for shade. The next day God provides a worm to attack the bush so it withers, and Jonah is scorched by the sun and again becomes angry. But God says to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry?” And Jonah says, “Yes, angry enough to die.” Then the LORD says, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons?”

Jonah’s reaction to the loss of the protective bush is the same as his reaction to God’s sparing of Nineveh. In the first case he is angry at God’s mercy; now he misses God’s protective grace. From God we learn of God’s sovereignty over, and care for, the whole creation rather than solely on Nineveh’s repentance and Jonah’s reputation. Thankfully, we’re given a glimpse of the world through God’s perspective and not solely through Jonah’s perspective.

You see, God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. Thanks be to God! Not that I don’t pray that our ways more closely mirrored God’s ways, and that our thoughts more closely mirrored God’s thoughts. But I wouldn’t want

it the other way around. I am thankful that God doesn't follow in human ways or human thoughts. What kind of god would that be – that becomes embroiled in petty disputes, sought short-term gratification, and put self-interest before the interests of others? That sounds a lot like Jonah!

We see this played out in today's Gospel lesson about the laborers who are hired at different times during the day. When at the end of the day all the laborers are paid the same amount, regardless of when they started to work, the earliest to be hired complain. We may take their side and see the unfairness of the situation, until we realize that we may well be, in God's sight, among those who were hired at the end of the day. We may be among those who come to the faith later and more slowly than others, but through God's mercy and grace, God still claims us as God's own. For Jesus tells that the last will be first and the first will be last. Thankfully, God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

As much as we might like to play God, we are blessedly free from the awesome responsibility of being God. We don't have to make life and death decisions. We don't carry the weight of the whole world on our shoulders. We may think we carry the weight of the whole world on our shoulders, but God doesn't put the weight there; we put the weight there on our own shoulders. Remember, Jesus is the one who said, "Come to me, all you that travail and are heavy laden – all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." God in Jesus Christ is only too willing to share our burden.

There's a saying: Let go and let God. Let go of your burdens, let go of your anger, let go of your frustration, let go of your disappointment, let go of whatever is troubling you, and let God take care of it. Let God be God. You don't have to play God! Instead, you can take whatever is troubling you to God in prayer, and God will share your burden. That's what the people of Nineveh did: they heeded Jonah's call to repentance and turned away from their evil ways and turned toward God in prayer that God might spare them. God listened to their prayer and God did spare them, despite what Jonah wanted. For we know, despite Jonah's accusation of God being too merciful, that God is indeed gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. It's this kind of God that we want for our God and that we have for our God – not ourselves, not another human being, and not anything else in God's creation. For this we say, "Thanks be to God!" Amen.