

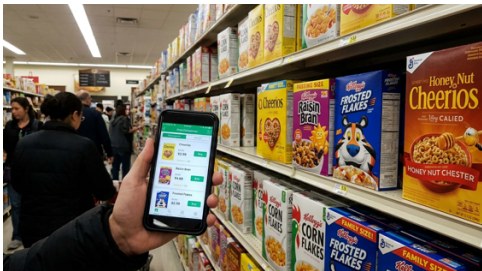
Reject the Math

Proper 20A

Jonah 3:10-4:11 · Psalm 145:1-8 · Philippians 1:21-30 · Matthew 20:1-16



Somewhere in Manhattan, a man in an Armani suit
will step away from his Bentley,
ascend a glass skyscraper in a private elevator
step into his corner office, and stare at a screen...
running numbers so fast... the numbers... run *him*.
and by lunchtime he will turn a million dollars into three.
That's math.



Then there's the rest of us.
Standing in the cereal aisle... Comparing cost per ounce...
Coupons clipped. BOGOs circled in red pen.
Stretching a paycheck four days further than it wants to go.

Different rooms... different speeds... the same skill.
We trust math. We reward it.
And if you're good at it... you get the glass tower...
or you get through the month.
Bad at it... somebody else snaps up the difference.



We didn't just learn that math. We worship it.
We use it in boardrooms. We use it in checkout lines.
And when nobody's watching... we use it on each other.
Who called who last. Who apologized first.
Who owes how much to who... and why.

So hold onto your calculators.
 Because this week... **God** does the math
 Right out in the open... in front of everybody.
 and the answer He gets... may not sit right with you.



Meet a prophet who knew his math cold.

God sent Jonah to Nineveh — not just any city... **the** city.
 Capital of the empire that would one day
 march into Israel and never let it back up.



Imagine being asked to go back...
 back to the very shore your family left,
 back to the empire... the regime... the war...
 whatever took the land... the language...
 the ones who didn't make it onto the boat... or the plane...
 and *preach mercy* to **them**.
 Save the very same people... that built themselves up...
 with what they took... from your people.

Jonah ran the numbers before he ran from God.
 Nineveh's cruelty: Measured. Recorded. Owed.
 A debt that size *doesn't* get ***forgiven***. It gets ***collected***.

So he boards a boat... going the other direction.
 not because he doubts God can save Nineveh.
 He's terrified... that God ***will***.

You know the rest of the story... The storm... the big fish... three days in the dark...
 doing math he didn't want to do.
 And when he finally does speak... it's just ***one sentence***,
In forty days... Nineveh falls.
 That's the whole sermon.

And it works.



The king ***steps off his throne***.
 The entire city ***dressed in sackcloth***
 Even *the cattle* are ***fasting***.
 Everything Jonah feared happens:
Nineveh repents, and God relents.

But Jonah didn't celebrate.
 He gets ***furious***
 And tells God exactly why in no uncertain terms:



*"I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful,
 slow to anger, and of great kindness...
 That is why I ran in the first place."*

Jonah isn't angry God failed. He's angry God *succeeded* succeeded at being *exactly, predictably, infuriatingly merciful* to people... *who by Jonah's math, hadn't earned an ounce of it.*

So he stormed out, sat on a hill, and waited to see...
If God might still torch the place. While he grumbles alone
God grows a plant over him for shade
And for a little while... Jonah is happy about the plant.
Then a worm kills it, the sun comes back like a hammer,
and Jonah says *I'd rather die than live... over one plant.*

God asks the question this whole story has been building to:

You pity the plant
which you did not labor for and did not grow.
Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city,
with more than a hundred and twenty thousand people?

One plant... that cost him nothing... he had for one day...
and Jonah grieves it like a death.

A hundred and twenty thousand people...
made in the image of God...
and he wants them gone!

That's what happens... when you let arithmetic tell you...
who deserves mercy.

The *math* was never wrong.
Nineveh's cruelty was *real*.
Jonah's grief was *real*.
But God... *was never doing Jonah's math.*

Moving on...
A vineyard runs on math. Ask any grower.



The exact sugar content of the grape,
measured to the decimal...

Because if you pick too early... *the wine is thin*

Too late... *and it's syrup.*

Rainfall totals. Acid tests. pH balance.

Yield per acre... calculated down to each individual vine.

A wine maker who can't do math... doesn't stay a wine maker.

But stand in the vineyard at harvest...

and watch what the math produces.

Rows of vines. Same year. Same soil. Same sun. Same rain...

and still... *no two vintages ever taste quite the same.*

Something happens... between the measuring and the glass... that no spreadsheet can reveal.

Growers just call it... *the place.*

as if *the dirt itself remembers something the numbers can't.*

You *need* the math to get you *to the door.*

But *what walks through is art.*

No one has ever wept over a wine

because the sugar count was correct.

Which is exactly the kind of place Jesus likes to set a story.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner

who went out early in the morning

to hire laborers for his vineyard



He agrees with the first workers on a denarius for the day.

He goes out again at nine, at noon, at three,

finding more people standing around each time,

and sends them in too: whatever is right, I'll pay you.

Then at *five o'clock... one hour* left...
 he finds still more workers standing there and asks
"Why are you standing here idle all day?"
"Because no one hired us."
 So he sends them into his vineyard as well.

When the sun set and it was time to pay the workers...
 The foreman started with the last ones hired...
The one-hour workers... and paid them a full denarius.
 Word travels fast. By the time it reached the six-a.m. crew...
 the ones who bore the burden of the day in the scorching heat...
They're doing math... before their envelopes are open:
if the one-hour men got a denarius, we're getting more!



They got exactly what they agreed to that morning.
 Not one coin short.
 And they are furious.

*These last worked only one hour,
 and you have made them equal to us,
 who have borne the burden of the day
 and the scorching heat.*

The landowner didn't argue the math.
 He can't. They're right.
 He asks *something else* instead:

*"Friend, I did you no wrong.
 Did you not agree with me for a denarius?
 Take what is yours and go.*

*I choose to give to this last...
 the same as I give to you.*

*Is it not lawful
 for me to do what I choose
 with what belongs to me?
 Or is your eye evil... because I am good?"*

Every worker got exactly what was fair. Nobody was cheated. The math was flawless.
 And the six-a.m. crew *still walked away wounded*
 not because they were *owed* more,
 but because *someone else got mercy they didn't need to earn.*

Ever felt that way?
 I have.



I was young... but old enough *to complain properly*
 and I went to my mother with a grievance.
 Something wasn't fair. Someone else had gotten what I hadn't.
 I laid it all out for her, case closed, math checked twice.

She didn't argue.
 She asked me to recite the Ten Commandments
the ones I'd memorized for Confirmation
 the ones I thought I'd never need again
 once the bishop's hand came off my head.

I recited them. All ten. Glowing with pride.

Then she stopped me on one word.
"Covet." "What does that mean?"

I gave her the Sunday school answer
wanting what belongs to somebody else.

She just looked at me...
the way mothers do when they already know the answer
and are just waiting for you to catch up...
"Do you think that might have something to do
with what you just told me?"

I did not enjoy that question. But I have never forgotten it.

Because she was right. *What I'd called unfair*
 was really just **coveting** with better lawyers.
 I *hadn't* been cheated.

I watched someone else *get something*
and decided their good fortune
was a debt against me.



That's the six-a.m. crew... a full denarius in hand...
exactly what they were promised... and it feels like robbery.

Not because the math was wrong. It was perfect.
They said so themselves.

***But watching someone else get the same reward
for less of the burden
turned a fair wage into an insult.***

That's not injustice.

That's *covetousness*... wearing a *fairness complaint for a coat*.

We just met a man doing this exact same thing... Jonah.
He didn't complain that God was unjust... ***he couldn't.***
God ***kept His word***
the same word Jonah threw back at Him *as an accusation:*
slow to anger, abounding in mercy.

Nineveh got *exactly* what ***grace always gives***
more than it was owed... freely.

And Jonah sat down and wished he was dead.

Now fast forward three thousand years.
A vineyard instead of a city.

Same man.
Two different stories.
Running the identical equation:
*my portion measured against
someone else's mercy... and coming up short.*

Not short in what they received.
Short in what they could stand to watch someone else get.

The very words Jonah spit out as accusation...
Slow to anger, abounding in mercy
In Jonah's mouth... ***a complaint.***
In the psalmist's... ***an act of love.***



*"The Lord is gracious and full of compassion,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
The Lord is loving to everyone
and his compassion is over all his works."*

Over all his works.
Not just the ones ***who earned it.***

That's not ***a loophole*** in God's justice.
That's ***the whole shape of it.***

*A loophole would mean the real rule is still counting
mercy slipping in a side door
when nobody's watching the books too closely.*

But the psalm doesn't put a fence around God's compassion.
It says His compassion ***is over all*** His works —
Not around the edges of justice. Underneath it. Holding it up.



**Mercy was never God bending His own rules.
Mercy is the rule.**

Everything else... the ledgers. the hours.
what we think we're owed
*was always going to give way
the moment grace showed up in the room.*



Paul knew that as well as anyone. Better, maybe.
By the time he wrote this letter, he wasn't doing math about someone else's wage.
He was doing math *about his own life* —
sitting in a Roman prison

*For to me, living is Christ... and **dying is gain.***

Run that through ordinary arithmetic... it breaks the calculator.

Losing your life is supposed to be **the total loss.**

From everything else... you can recover...

a job. a house. a broken relationship.

You're still standing. Alive. Able to hope.

But **your life itself** is the one column *where the books just close.*

No comeback. No next chapter. The final entry.



But when Paul looks at *that* column
and calls it gain.

Not a loss he learned to tolerate.
 Not a comfort he talked himself into.
He calls it... gain.

Not because he's given up, not because prison broke him...
he genuinely can't decide which he'd choose,
"hard-pressed between the two,"
because both options are actually good.
 To live means more fruitful work.
 To die means being with Christ... which he says... ***is far better.***

Most of us only get one side of that math to make sense —
 living as the win and dying as the loss.

Paul is the only man in Scripture calmly holding both sides —
living and dying, staying and going...
like two sides of the same coin,
and calling both of them gain.

That's not a man who's given up on life.
 That's not a man numb to death.
 That's a man who did what Jonah refused...
 what the six-a.m. crew refused:
he let go of counting altogether.
He stopped treating his life
as a ledger to protect, defend, come out ahead on.

Once Christ is the sum, there's no losing column left.

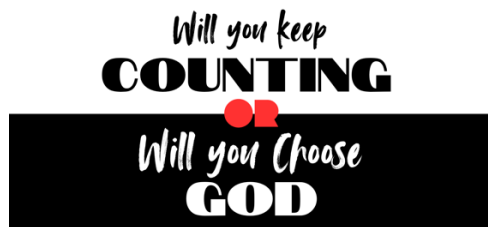
Which is why... in his very next breath
 he was able to tell the Philippians...
Stand firm... unafraid...
suffering for the gospel as a privilege — not a cost.

You can't talk about suffering... as a gift...
unless you stop counting it as a cost.
That's just not how God's balance sheet works.

Paul *is not* praising suffering.
 He's not telling them to enjoy their chains.
 He's telling them something stranger:
once Christ is the sum of your life,
the math simply stops mattering.

Paul closed the books and found nothing left to add or subtract
only a Person left to hold onto.

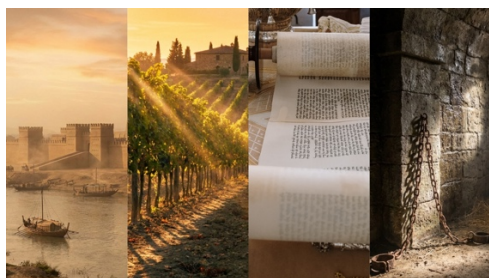
Which is the real question underneath all four readings.
Not is God's math fair. Not did I get what I deserved.
 The real question God keeps putting to Jonah on the hillside,
 the worker at the gate, Paul in his cell, you in that pew:



Will you keep counting? Or will you choose Me?

So here we are.

Four readings... one math problem underneath all of them.



Jonah did the math on Nineveh and got angry.

God didn't.

*The six-a.m. crew did the math on a denarius and got angry. **God didn't.***

But the psalmist rejected the balance sheet...

and found a song!

slow to anger, full of compassion, over all His works.

Paul did the math on his own life

And rejected the debit sheet entirely.

Four people, four centuries, ***one question for you... right now:***

Will you keep counting? Or will you choose Me?

Ask yourself...

Did I walk in here... hoping to bump up my divine scorecard?

Some of you did...

A little more prayer to balance the ledger.

A little more patience, a little less anger,

Make this Sunday's total come out better than last Sunday's.

***There is no score. There never was.
You cannot improve on a number God was never keeping.***

*We think the good news is that God does the math
and it comes out in our favor.*

It doesn't. It's better than that.

God set the math aside.
He put it down... and won't pick it back up.
Denarius for denarius, sunrise to sunset, seventy times seven —
He was never balancing a ledger.



He was standing at the gate at five o'clock...
looking at the ones nobody else would hire...
*and say **come in anyway.***

So... this week... when that old arithmetic rears its ugly head...
someone else's mercy looking like your loss
fairness sounding like a grievance
Counting what you're owed instead of what's already given
remember the question God is actually asking you.

*Not did you get what you deserved.
But rather...
Will you keep counting? Or will you choose Me?*

Now right here... is where most sermons on this subject end...
But not today... Because there is one more question before you.

How do I do it?

Not in some vague... someday sense... actually do it. Concretely. This week.
Do you want out of the counting?
Do you want off the ledger for good?

Because wanting it isn't enough. You need a route.



Maybe you set a GPS point right now —
one honest prayer tonight... no scorekeeping attached.

Another waypoint on Wednesday —
The next time you catch yourself counting.
STOP. And you say one word out loud: **Grace**.
Take a breath. And say it again. As many times as it takes

Another waypoint next Sunday —
you walk back into this sanctuary
and you *actually believe*
you didn't earn your way to this pew.

Small points. Real ones. Marking the road as you go.

Will you take the scenic route?
Slow. Deliberate. Learning to trust mercy an inch at a time,
letting the view change you before the destination does.

Or will you default to the fast lane —
force it, white-knuckle it, try to arrive at grace
the same way you've arrived at everything else:
by working harder, calculating faster,
trying to out-drive your own doubt?

Or — be honest with yourself here —
will you deny the map even exists?
Keep driving in the same circles,
telling yourself the ledger was never really a ledger,
that the counting was just being careful,
that this sermon was about somebody else?

Here's what I pray happens instead.

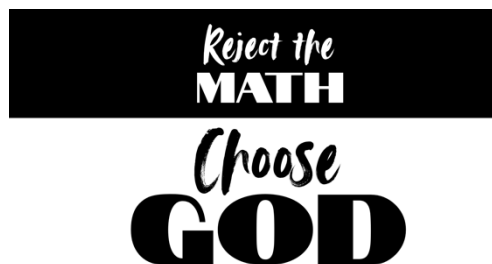
I hope you're driving
however slowly, however imperfectly
and somewhere between one GPS point and the next,
you look up and realize...



*You're not still on the way.
You're already there.*

Grace was never up ahead, waiting on your arrival.
It was in the car with you the entire time.
You were just too distracted
counting exits... checking the mirror... measuring the miles...
to notice... Who is riding... right beside you.

That could happen today.
Right here. Before you leave this room.



**Reject the math.
Choose God.**

Amen.