

ROOM TO REPENT

We just heard what has got to be the shortest and effective sermon in history. And Jonah cried out, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people believed God and they repented. Wow, I’m impressed, aren’t you? I’ve preached in excess of 1300 sermons thus far and none of them has had anything even close to that response. Maybe I’m just using too many words and we should just move onto the prayer time. Let’s take a closer look.

The book of Jonah, despite being a mere 48 verses, has intrigued generations of readers and scholars. Despite much debate, there is no settled date for when it was written. Scholarly proposals range over a period of seven centuries. Not only is the date unfathomable but how to classify this book is equally mystifying. Is it an allegory, a fable, a fairy tale, folklore, historical account, legend, myth, midrash, novella, parable, parody, prophetic tale, saga, satire, sermon, short story, or tragedy? About all folks can agree upon is that it is a “literary gem.” Now, you wouldn’t know that from this morning’s lectionary passage which provides us with a mere six verses halfway into the story. Take amount this afternoon and read the whole thing. Like I said, it’s just 48 verses.

The story of Jonah is fairly well known. In summary: An Israelite prophet is called to deliver a message of judgment to Nineveh, the capital city of the dreaded Assyrian Empire. As is true of so many prophets and folks called by God, Jonah is initially reluctant to answer the call and heads off in the opposite direction. He sails to Tarshish. Which brings up another literary/historical problem. No one knows where Tarshish actually is. Metaphorically, Tarshish is the place you go when you want to answer God’s call on your own terms. I suspect many of us have been there. It’s that place of greener pastures where everyone gets along, and where justice is readily served. It is where the God we envision calls us to things that are challenging but manageable, that feed our egos and nurture our hero complexes. Tarshish is where, if we’re honest, God serves us rather than us serving God.

And we can’t blame Jonah for wanting to go there. After all God has called Jonah to go to, of all places, Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. You will recall that the Assyrians were the enemy of Jonah’s people. They had ravaged and pillaged Israel, taking its wealth and occupying its land. From a historical perspective, Assyria was evil incarnate. That would be like calling a progressive Christian to go to the headquarters of the white supremacy group Christian Identity or to a gathering of QAnon supporters. It would be like going to the scary parts of Idaho – Idaho is a beautiful state but has a long history of scary people dwelling there.

So, Jonah, says, thanks but no thanks God, I’ve got a better idea. I hear there is a really great mission field in Tarshish. But he never gets there. Here’s the part of the story you are probably most acquainted with. God sends a big storm that batters the boat Jonah is traveling upon. In order to save the ship and the sailors he thrown overboard where he swallowed up by a big fish. After being in the fish for three days the fish vomits him up on dry land. At this point God tries again, as we heard in our lesson this morning, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” This time Jonah goes but he’s not happy about it and

after only walking about a third of the way into the city he preaches a rather lackluster sermon: “repent or be destroyed” And wonder of wonders – it works! As Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it,

They stopped their violent ways, they dealt with their systemic racism and provided universal health care and separated their recycling.

Now you’d think Jonah would be happy about this, but he’s not. He’s ticked. The version of the Bible we heard this morning plays says “this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry” (4:1). The Hebrew, however, reads roughly, “it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and his anger burned.” The “it” of Jonah’s anger is the heart of the matter.

As we continue to deal with the aftermath of the attack on the Capitol we are already hearing cries for healing and unity, the need to move on and let bygones be bygones before justice has barely been considered, let alone served. My seminary classmate, Senator Chris Coons of Delaware, reminds us of why this approach is problematic, “There can only be reconciliation with repentance.” For us to be one with God and one another, we must be willing to be held accountable for any injustice we commit, especially when it causes harm to another. We must be willing to acknowledge our actions. The question that Jonah poses is, “Are we prepared to extend such forgiveness to the repentant?” As those who worship a merciful God, are we capable of offering true mercy?

I think we need to take more than a moment to think about this. Mercy sounds great when we are seeking it; it is another matter when we are being asked to offer it. Nadia Bolz-Weber pretty well sums up the difficulty:

That’s what’s hard about reading Jonah - I have to look at how maybe I too need my enemies to *stay* my enemies, since it’s hard to know who I am if I don’t know who I’m against. And maybe I need for the apologies of those who have done wrong to never ever be “good enough” for me, because being the one who is right is a comfy place to be. ... Reading Jonah, I am confronted with how uncomfortable it is for God to show love and mercy to those I do not believe deserve it.

You know how it is. You have some encounters with someone and because of their actions or their speech, you decide that they are a jerk. Now, every time you encounter them you prepare yourself for them to act like a jerk. And you know what, you are hardly ever disappointed. Perhaps, however, you are part of the problem. When we assume that folks are a certain way – forever, we box them in, we grant them no room for maneuvering, we don’t allow them the freedom to change. If we can approach each encounter, no doubt a bit wary, but open to the other acting in surprising ways, they may very well surprise us. This is the beginning of mercy. It’s not exoneration. It’s not moving on. It’s giving someone the chance to repent – to change their ways.

Eugene Peterson notes:

Jonah’s disappointment came from a failure of imagination, a failure of heart...He had a program laid out for Nineveh (“Nineveh shall be overthrown!”). But God had a destiny to

fulfill in Nineveh (“And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city?”)... Jonah had a child-size plan that did not pan out; God had a hugely dimensioned destiny that surprised everyone when it was enacted.... Jonah thought he had come to Nineveh to do a religious job, to administer a religious program. God had brought Jonah to Nineveh to give him an experience of amazing grace. The tables are turned: it is no longer Jonah preaching to the people of Nineveh, but the people of Nineveh preaching to Jonah, inviting him into a vocation far beyond anything he had supposed.

The Book of Jonah is read in the Jewish calendar on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, when Jews confess their sins against God and neighbor. How willing are we to let God be God? Salvation is pure gift and grace and Jonah’s story reminds us that we do not own that grace, nor is it ours to dole out as we wish. God will be forgiving because that is the very heart of God. Sadly, the spiritual gift many Christians seem to possess is the gift of righteous indignation. If we do not believe that God would save the most foul of humans, then do we really believe in God’s power to save us? Cycles of violence and blame can only be broken where mercy is extended. As we move forward may we never be timid in extending the same mercy to others that God has extended to us.

AMEN.