

“If God Were in Charge”
Jonah 3:1-10; 4:1-4
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3rd Sunday after Epiphany
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If God were in charge, violence would be put down. We wouldn't have to worry about youth with nothing to do, corruption in the police department, kids dropping out of school. If God were in charge, we wouldn't be in the political mess that we are in. The government would be open and white supremacy would shut down. If God were in charge, harassment and harassers would no longer be allowed in the Oval office or anywhere else for that matter. #metoo would be attached to something joyful because the terrible things it opposes would have stopped already. Men and women would learn respect. Men and women might not even be useful categories any more. Just human beings who learn to listen and relate. If God were in charge, there'd be no more ISIS or Al Qaeda or Hezbollah. No Bloods or Crips or MS-13. There'd be no more need for the American military for that matter or any military of any other kind. M-16s and AK-47s would be beaten into solar panels and wind mills and melted down into the iron beams to replace schools without heat. If God were in charge, ice would be the thing you put in a drink in summer, not a force that you use to remove poor, unemployed people risking their lives for food and shelter; the homeless poor would have housing when they wanted it, treatment when they needed it, and we'd take the \$173,000 that it takes each year to incarcerate a youth and hire a therapist, a personal coach and a tutor to keep them out of prison and on the right track instead.

If God were in charge all the wrongs would be righted, justice would be done on earth as it is in heaven. That's the way we talk about God because that's who God is: the justice-maker; the peace-maker; the king of kings & Lord of lords. The righter of wrongs.

Of course, there are consequences to framing God like that. If God is the justice-maker, then what's she waiting for? Why's he taking so long? Lots of people come up with different answers to those sorts of questions. Some have suggested that *this* world is not the important one. We should go to church and believe what we're told, *chill out* when it comes to the world around us and wait until we die when the real fun begins. Life is just one long game of delayed gratification, which sounds to me like a dreadful way to live, not to mention a terrible gamble to take with the life we've already been given. Others have said, obviously there is no God. If there was a God then clearly God wouldn't have allowed things to get as screwed up as they've become. Still others say that God wants us to figure it out on our own which only begs the question: what's the point of believing in God if we're just supposed to figure it out? None of those explanations are satisfactory to some of us who are left to wonder, given all the crazy stuff that's going on the world and in our city and in some of our lives, can we ever say that God is actually in charge?

Jonah doesn't seem to wrestle with this question. He's probably the only one of us who's already decided with total clarity that God is absolutely in charge.

Unlike most of us, I think Jonah is pretty confident that he knows exactly what God is up to in the world. Unlike most of us, Jonah doesn't worry whether God exists or where God is. It's not God's absence from the scene that bothers Jonah. It's God's graciousness that upsets Jonah. It's the content of God's character that drives him crazy. It's God's inclination for choosing mercy when judgment has already been pronounced. It's God's habit of granting forgiveness to people who have done things that are unforgivable that makes Jonah want to turn and run.

Which makes Jonah sound like a big jerk, a vindictive person, unwilling to forgive. Maybe even xenophobic, hateful toward a country of people he doesn't even know. Jonah, the close-minded Israelite who doesn't like foreigners. That's Jonah's M.O. in some of the commentaries. The one close-minded prophet in Scripture we're not supposed to emulate.

But I don't think that characterization is fair to Jonah, not when you know the history of the Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria where Jonah is being sent. The artwork on the front of your bulletin cover is a little window into the Assyrian Empire at the end of the 8th century when this story was set. Israel was a little vassal state, what the Assyrians would have called a little "s-hole" country. That poor little state was stuck in between two global empires – the Egyptians to the south and the Assyrians to the north. Both demanded tribute from Israel – pay us money and we won't mess with you: a kind of nation-state mafia. At the end of the 8th century, King Hezekiah of Judah took a gamble and told the Assyrians, no I won't pay you tribute. He allied himself with the Egyptians instead. The Assyrian ruler called his bluff, invaded and destroyed cities and towns with brutal carnage.

The artwork on the front of your bulletin was taken from reliefs that the Assyrian dictator commissioned to celebrate one of his victories. Each of the reliefs was floor to ceiling height, approximately 2.5 meters tall depicting the Assyrian view of the battles - reliefs illustrating the destruction of villages, the taking of women and children into slavery, the beheading of Israelite leaders begging for mercy, the impaling of Israelite citizens on long poles, the de-skinning of live soldiers. This artwork adorned the dictator's palace, celebrating his raw, brutal power.¹

Jonah says to God, I refuse to go to these people, not because I'm afraid of dying, not because I'm xenophobic, not because I'm closed minded. I won't go because I refuse to participate in forgiving violence, I refuse to participate in your slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love that I know you are likely to extend even to Assyrians. I can't stomach the depth of forgiveness that you are willing to extend.

And while I know that Jonah is not the prophet we are supposed to emulate – no one, after all asks, WWJD - what would Jonah do – not unless it's to point out the opposite - I think we ought to hesitate before dismissing his views so quickly.

Jonah is one of the few prophets who understands - from the beginning - who God is. Who understands how offensive God's graciousness is to a people who have

¹ Although I was familiar with the reliefs, I am indebted to Osama S. M. Amin whose blog post, "Siege of Lachish Reliefs at the British Museum," gives an excellent description along with striking photos. The post can be found here on the *Ancient History* website - <http://etc.ancient.eu/photos/siege-lachish-reliefs-british-museum/>.

been on the receiving end of brutal power. Who understands how upsetting it can be to learn that the one we call “our God” is the God of all people, even people who have been on the wrong side of justice. Jonah is one of the few who understands that one of the bigger problems for people of faith is not that God is absent, but God is offensively present, manifesting the possibility of reconciliation for any person who would seek it. To any sinner who is willing to turn and change. To any nation who is willing to put down its warring madness and seek peace. To any city who is willing to lay down its weapons and seek another way. God is likely to be more gracious than any of us would ever be.

And maybe we need that reminder in a city that has lost 900 people to violence in the last 3 years. Maybe we need that in families or friendships torn apart by that unending cycle of hurt. God is focused on our future, on what is necessary to establish long-lasting peace, long-lasting justice – much more difficult than simply stopping the hurt.

It helps to see that repentance is still required. The Assyrians have to make the decision to stop their violence. They have to choose to live differently. They have to want it. Repentance is not optional for those living by violence. There is no cheap grace for the abusers, the assaulters, or the trigger pullers. They have to choose a different way. God will end the Assyrian way of violence one way or another. God will bring about peace.

But maybe that good news is the very thing that human beings have such a hard time learning. God’s goal isn’t to punish people for violence, it is to stop violence altogether. God doesn’t want to become the retaliator in chief, God wants to end retaliation altogether. God isn’t set on vengeance, on pay back, but on justice. And it’s so easy to get those things confused when you’ve been wronged. It’s hard to get it right. It’s hard to keep your eye on healing when all you know is pain.

A friend of mine went to a prayer vigil last week for those killed in Baltimore in 2017. 343 lives lost in our city 2017. He said they got to the end of the vigil and a mother of one of the slain began to read the names of those who had been killed. She was quickly overcome with emotion and could not continue. So a different person, a mother of yet another young man murdered in 2017 picked up where the person who was supposed to read left off. The woman found her place on the page and realized the next person on the list was the name of her own son. She took a breath, he told me, and read it strong and clear. Then she turned the page and saw the next name. And this mother, in pain, yes, but also with holy vision, took a deep breath and read the next name – it was the name of the young man who had killed her son.

Maybe like Jonah she already knew who God is. The God of all people, even people who have been on the wrong side of justice. The God who offers the possibility of reconciliation to any person who would seek it. To any sinner who is willing to turn and change. To any nation who is willing to put down its warring madness and seek peace. To any city willing to lay down its weapons and seek another way. The God of offensive grace dead-set on healing us – all of us – however long it takes.