

“Nineveh, Anger, and Us” Matthew 20:1-16; Jonah 3:10-4:11

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Jonah is a prophet who does not want his job. Since we're stepping in midstream, here is the quick version. He receives a direct command from God to preach to the Gentiles in Nineveh, and he refuses to go. He takes off on a ship going the opposite direction, gets caught in a storm at sea, and his shipmates throw him overboard because they believe it will calm the storm and save their lives. A whale swallows him up and delivers him to Nineveh, the city he wanted to avoid all along. Jonah reluctantly does what God commanded him to do from the beginning--preach God's message of relationship and love, and give the people a chance to change.

He delivers the final message for repentance and change, and heads outside the city gates in order to watch the show. God had promised to destroy them if they did not change their ways. Jonah expects a Sodom and Gomorrah display of God's wrath, so he leaves the city in anticipation of fire and brimstone. God changes their mind about the destruction they said they would rain down on Nineveh if they did not repent of their evil ways. The people changed and became followers of God.

Plot twist--they did repent of their ungodly ways after Jonah comes to minister to them. Deep down, Jonah does not want God to save Nineveh. He would prefer his attempts to rescue them from themselves to fail because he believes their salvation is a betrayal of the spiritual and moral codes he follows as a Jewish man. Dr. Margaret Odell helps us understand his feelings: "Nineveh was the capital of Israel's greatest enemy, Assyria. Nineveh's deliverance in Jonah's lifetime means that it will 'live to fight another day,' so to speak."¹ Of course Jonah does not want God to extend mercy to Nineveh, the seat of the Assyrian Empire. If God does not destroy Nineveh, who knows what else Nineveh can do to harm Israel and the nation-states that surround Assyria.

And, Jonah was right. Assyria created the world's first known professional military one hundred years later under the leadership of Tiglath Pileser III. War, militaries, and combat would never be the same, and Israel was eventually destroyed by the Assyrians. God's compassion, some might say, led to the evolution of war and military tactics.

Some trouble about how we read this passage, over simplified. Jonah is usually a scapegoat for reluctance to obey, for those of us who whine and moan about God's call on our lives. This reading belittles Jonah's reasonable anger and says more about our misunderstandings about the historical context of

¹ Enfleshed, lectionary commentary, September 20, 2020.

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this passage rather than what we can learn from it. Nations like Assyria still exist today. Some could say that Nineveh is similar to Washington, D. C., our nation’s capital, the center of military power and a symbol of global domination. The American empire is known for its horrific violence on foreign powers, our systems of white supremacy, our greed and corruption, our destruction of the climate. Women in ICE detention centers undergoing medical procedures they do not fully understand nor consent to having. Laborers exploited and killed for the production of iPhones, chocolate bars, and diamond rings. The living creatures whose habitats are annihilated because of our need for more fossil fuels. We are the Nineveh that a modern day Jonah would like to see destroyed. We, as a collective, are the ones that Jonah wants God to wipe off the face of the earth. Like Nineveh, our systems leave a few to benefit, the majority to suffer, and many to do both.

The United States is worthy of God’s judgment for the present day sins I listed above, and for others that have come to mind for you while I was talking. Some of us are gladly resisting the empire. Some of us are slowly working to change it from the inside. Others of us are gladly building the empire and see nothing wrong with the systems currently in place in our country.

But think of it--if Nineveh was destroyed, it would do great damage to the entire planet. It would be unfathomable damage. Like the United States, think of destruction of that magnitude. It is easy to picture why God does not want this kind of annihilation. It would mean killing innocent people oppressed by the corrupt systems and damaging an entire ecosystem. This is not justice. This is not what true mercy looks like. But if we look in the mirror of history and read the news with discernment, we can understand Jonah’s anger. We can hear his anger as relatable.

How many of us have cried out in anger at God? How many of us have cried out in anger at God for the lack of justice for the violence the United States has done?

God sends Jonah to the capital of the nation that will become a military superpower and teach the world how to organize a professional military. Jonah tells God, “Isn’t this what I told you would happen when I was still at home? That you would go and have compassion on them. This is why I didn’t want to come to Nineveh--I know what you’re like, God.”

But God does what God does. God creates an opening, an opportunity for change. For hope. God spares them because at the core, God is all merciful and compassionate. God created the entire universe--why wouldn’t God want to

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save the world that God had created? A postcolonial Korean scholar, Chesung Justin Ryu, brings the perspective of a colonized person and Christian to this text that offers us good news. Ryu argues, with an over emphasis on “God’s universal love and mercy, [we] emphasize the importance of repentance, and criticize Jonah as the personification of the narrow-minded Jew.”²

Oversimplified readings of this are not good news for us as non-Jewish modern day readers of this text. These interpretations verge on anti-Semitism and do not own the complexity of God’s mercy in this passage. Rather, we can read Jonah’s anger as a type of good news--it is good that Jonah wants justice for his community. It is good that Jonah does not want an empire known for its evil systems and practices to continue. His anger, like Mr. Rogers says, really belongs to him. Jonah is up front and honest with God.

The good news here is that God gives Nineveh an opportunity to change. To become a different city. To become a different world power. God is so wired for relationship that God will choose mercy and opportunity over wrath and destruction. And God gives Jonah an opportunity to participate in the extension of God’s mercy. The good news here is that Jonah encountered God’s mercy through the shade of a broom tree while he was waiting for God to destroy Nineveh.

Somehow, we have not annihilated ourselves yet, though we might be treading that road this very moment. Modern day Jonahs are waiting and watching while groups of people ask for forgiveness and others escalate the tension in our nation. Will the repentant ones turn this nation around? Will God’s mercy, the same mercy that allowed us to survive this long without destroying ourselves, come to an end? How do we understand the character of God and what we must do in this time and place, with the one life God has given us to live?

The trick here is that God could easily act without us, yet. Yet. God chooses to act with us, to use us as “instruments of peace,” as the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi would say.

So what do we need to do today to write the story differently for the present moment?

² Ryu, Chesung Justin. Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4:1-11. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. 2009.

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Will we listen to the anger of the colonized, the oppressed, and the systematically disenfranchised?

Will we listen to Jonah’s anger? Will we embrace our own anger at injustice?

Will we listen to when is the time to act on that anger and when is the time to hold it back?

Will we repent, and will we actually mean it?

Will we change in the moment, like Nineveh, and go back on our commitment to change, to govern differently, to lead differently, to use our privilege differently?

The God in the book of Jonah invites us to merciful action at the same time Jonah’s heart ignites our anger at injustice. But destruction is not the answer. The annihilation of a people and a place is not the answer, and will only lead to more violence and pain. We worship a God of justice and mercy. Go and live your life with justice and mercy flowing through your veins.

The good news is not that God spared Nineveh. The good news is that we are still living and breathing, resisting the powers of the empire as God’s people. Life is worth living. The good news is that God leaves the door open to mercy every day of our sacred lives. Walk through that door like the Assyrians, and do not walk backwards. Sit in the shade of the broom tree like Jonah, and experience God’s mercy. This precious life is one worth living. Amen.