



Not to Mention Cattle

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany ~ January 24, 2021*

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of YHWH came a second time to Jonah: "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to them as I told you to do." Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of YHWH. Nineveh was a city large beyond compare: it took three days to cross it. Jonah moved on into the city, making a day's journey. He proclaimed, "Only forty days more, and Nineveh is going to be destroyed!" So the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behavior. And God relented by not inflicting on them the disaster that threatened them.

Psalm 62:6-14

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| 6 | For God alone my soul in silence waits; *
truly, there is my hope. | | all of them together. |
| 7 | God alone is my rock and my salvation, *
my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken. | 12 | Put no trust in extortion;
in robbery take no empty pride; *
though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it. |
| 8 | In God is my safety and my honor; *
God is my strong rock and my refuge. | 13 | God has spoken once, twice have I heard it, *
that power belongs to God. |
| 9 | Put your trust in God always, O people, *
pour out your hearts before the One who is our refuge. | 14 | Steadfast love is yours, O God, *
for you repay everyone according to their deeds. |
| 10 | Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath, *
even those of low estate cannot be trusted. | | |
| 11 | On the scales they are lighter than a breath; * | | |

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

I tell you, sisters and brothers, the time is short. From now on, those with spouses should live as though they had none. Those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for, and those who rejoice should live as though they had nothing to laugh about. Buyers should conduct themselves as though they owned nothing, and those who have to deal with the world should live as if all their dealings meant nothing—for the world as we know it is passing away.

Mark 1:14-20

After John's arrest, Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Change your hearts and minds, and believe this Good News!" While walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw the brothers Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the sea, since they fished by trade. Jesus said to them, "Follow me; I will make you fishers of humankind." They immediately abandoned their nets and followed Jesus. Proceeding a little further along, Jesus saw the brothers James and John Bar-Zebedee. They too were in their boat, putting their nets in order. Immediately Jesus called them, and they left their father Zebedee standing in the boat with the hired help, and went off in the company of Jesus.

If you haven't read the Book of Jonah all the way through I would recommend that you do so. It is a fabulous story—one of those books that draws you in and makes you laugh at the main character and at yourself. When we drop in this morning the story is well underway. It started with Jonah, a good and faithful Israelite, minding his own business at his house in Joppa. Then God showed up and told him to get himself down to the docks and get on a ship headed east for the city of Nineveh (now known as Mosul, Iraq). There he was to tell the Ninevites they were on the wrong track and needed to shape up, fast, or God was going to wipe them out. Now, Nineveh was the capital of the nation that had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and had held the southern kingdom as slaves for over 100 years—not exactly the city an Israelite would want to help save. So Jonah heads down to the docks, takes a good long look at the ship with “To Nineveh” flashing on its bow and then makes a beeline for the ship headed in the exact opposite direction, the ship to Tarshish, where, he figured, God couldn't find him and bother him anymore. But, as anyone who has read the Bible knows, God is rather persistent, so God caused a great storm to come up on the water, threatening the ship to Tarshish. As soon as the sailors figured out what was going on they tossed Jonah off the boat to appease God, the storm stopped, and Jonah found himself sitting in the belly of a very large fish. Three days later the fish barfed Jonah out on the shore pretty much where he started and God again told him to head east to Nineveh, though this time God added “and I will tell you what to say when you get there.” And Jonah listened, muttering under his breath, “Why couldn't you have sent me to Jericho or somewhere I would be effective—but Ok, I'll go—I want to see what happens when Nineveh doesn't listen”. So he headed to the docks again and got on the first ship to Nineveh. Which is where the fun really starts.

Tired from his trip, stinky from 3 days in a fish's belly, and draped with seaweed, Jonah wanders into Nineveh and preaches what in Hebrew was only a 5 word sermon. The rough translation is “Yo, Nineveh, in 40 days God is going to wipe you off the face of the earth.” He wanders the streets, proclaiming this message, then heads off to a hill nearby to watch what happens next. He knows there is no way the Ninevites will repent and, sitting in his folding chair and munching on popcorn, he is pretty psyched to watch God destroy his enemies.

Meanwhile, in Nineveh, those 5 words have actually had an impact. The King repents his evil ways, the people repent their evil ways, heck, even the cattle get into it and throw on some sackcloth in an act of repentance. And here is the kicker, it seems even God repents. The text says that God's holy mind changed and God went in a different direction, choosing not to blow Nineveh up after all. And, we assume, everyone was thrilled...except Jonah—who, rather than high fiving himself that he was such an awesome preacher he just caused 150,000 people to repent, not to mention a whole lot of cattle, was hopping mad that God wasn't going to unleash disaster. So he sat on the hillside and sulked—watching and hoping that God would eventually come to God's senses and teach Nineveh a lesson. But instead God has a little fun at Jonah's expense, causing a plant to spring up and shade him from the intense sun—and Jonah loved that plant. But during the night God caused the plant to wither and so the next day Jonah just sat and baked. And got angry. And wished he was dead. And complained bitterly to God—who told him that if he, Jonah, was so worked up about the destruction of a plant that he had neither planted nor tended, shouldn't God be worried about all the people living in Nineveh, not to mention the cattle? Which is where the story ends—great last line.

The hardest thing for Jonah to swallow in this story is God's mercy to those Jonah was 100% sure were lousy, totally undeserving people. He basically hated it when God got all loving, forgiving, and merciful to others. And the uncomfortable truth is we tend to think the same way—that God should definitely love and forgive us, but really should take a firm line with others. I know it can be hard sometimes for each of us to feel worthy of God's love—I know all of the things I have done that have made God shake the holy head and say, “oy”—and these things are ever before me. But I also know how easy it is to make excuses for my own behavior—reasons these things shouldn't really be held against me the way they should for those other sinners. “God, I was pretty hungry that day I snapped at my husband, so really, anyone would have had a short fuse”. “God, I prayed to you at least once last week so that pretty much means we are square, right?” And then I turn to my neighbor and see him lashing out at someone, or her paying no attention to God and I mentally pounce. “Ooooh, God—did you see that?” See, I am at least better than her. My inner Jonah is never deeply buried. I am really good at keeping the books for God—counting sins and putting people in “ok”, “iffy” and “right out” categories. And many days I am confident that God is thrilled to have my help keeping the books.

But the truth, revealed to Jonah and clearly revealed in Jesus, is that God is not in the sin accounting business at all. God did not label the Ninevites as evil and write them off but rather kept trying different ways to reach them and get them to turn to God. Jesus had no interest whatsoever in keeping books, in putting people into categories, labeling them as “ok” or “right out”. He ate with those polite society had written off as unworthy, he hung out with prostitutes and lepers, he invited all the outsiders to the banquet and, just when everyone thought they could pin him down into the category of “hippie do gooder” he went and ate with the wealthy pharisees and tax collectors. He consistently refused to

distinguish between male and female, slave and free, rich and poor, even Jew and Gentile. For Jesus, for God, it seems there are no categories. Ninevites are just as “in” as Israelites. Yemenis and Iranians are just as in as Americans. You are just as in as me. The only thing it seems we can be sure of regarding God’s accounting is that when we draw a line in the sand and declare the other side “out”, God is standing squarely on the other side of the line, looking us in the eyes.

That is something with which I am struggling mightily in this time of division, this age when White supremacists and others who would oppress and degrade those who do not look or think like them attacked the Capitol. When some delight in spewing lies and amassing power—my inner Jonah is very much outer and I have a long list of people: politicians, anarchists, religious leaders, White supremacists that I really think God should smite. Yet I am also aware that I, too, am a candidate for smiting. That I have done things that grieve God’s heart too. Now, to be clear, I am not saying that God is fine with politicians who lie, divide, and enact policies that oppress and abuse. Or that God sympathizes with White supremacists, or anarchists. Or that God is OK with preachers who lead people into evil by confusing their own power for the Gospel (Jesus had quite a bit to say about that). God is not going to put the Holy Arm around their shoulders and say, “great job”. I believe such actions break God’s heart and that God’s desire is for them to go in a different direction, the direction of love and justice. And I am not saying that any of us who do evil, who oppress abuse and degrade others, should not suffer the consequences of our actions—we absolutely should. And I firmly believe that those responsible for planning, leading, encouraging the attack on our Capitol should be held accountable. Those who planned and enacted the policy of separating children from their parents at the border should be held accountable. Those who preach what is the antithesis of God’s love and justice, should be held accountable. But I am saying that God loves them. God made them and God dreams for them a different way. Just as God loves you and me, made you and me, and dreams for us a different way. And I am saying that we do not get to write any human being off as trash—we who say we respect the dignity of all people. I am saying that the way forward for all of us is grounded in the love of God—a love which tells the truth, which holds us accountable, but which grounds all of this in love.

From God’s perspective, I am guessing the mess we have made of the world, of our common life, is rather sad. And I think from God’s perspective we are all both a mess and beloved children. And I think, I know, that God’s love, mercy and forgiveness, is far greater than our minds can comprehend. That repentance, acknowledgment, truth telling, and restitution brings forgiveness, and underlying all of that is the love of God.—a fierce wild unconditional love.

Which really is good news for all of us who struggle and fail, who try to go in a different direction with varying degrees of success. It really is good news for Jonah, for you and for me—not to mention the cattle.

With thanks for Barbara Brown Taylor whose thoughts influenced this sermon.

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