

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor

The Third Sunday after Epiphany B ~ January 24, 2021
Jonah 3:1-5, 10, Psalm 62:5-12, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: Amen

We continue this morning in our lessons with the theme of being called that we treated last week, as well. The portion of the Jonah story is appointed as our Old Testament reading because it complements the Gospel – since Jonah had so much trouble with accepting **his** call to be one of God’s prophets.

Even though we enter Jonah’s world in our reading with “the word of the Lord” coming to him for the **second** time, we can look back at the **first** time God called Jonah into service. God’s instructions to Jonah were to get up and go to Nineveh and preach that they repent from their sinfulness within forty days, or the great city would be overthrown.

You remember that Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the brutal, destroying, age-old enemy of the Hebrews. Jonah wasn’t really interested in going to Nineveh. First of all, it would probably be dangerous for him to be among all those enemies. And he knew one of the basic understandings about God: that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. So there was a good likelihood that, if the Assyrians repented, God would save them from destruction. Jonah didn’t want his people’s enemy to be saved – he wanted them to get what he thought that they deserved – destruction!

So, you remember, Jonah got on a ship bound for Tarshish so God wouldn’t know where he was (as if that would prevent God from knowing where he was). Once the ship was at sea, a terrible storm arose and it wasn’t long before the crew figured out that it was Jonah’s presence on the ship that was the reason for the storm. So he went overboard, and a great big fish “was appointed” to swallow him. And there he stayed for three days and nights. That mustn’t have been much more pleasant than being in Nineveh would have been. So Jonah realized that, once called, he had to follow, and God moved the fish to vomit Jonah out on land - near Nineveh.

Jonah got up, cleaned himself off and went to Nineveh. Walking from one side of the city to another, he cried out his message from God: “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!” No surprise to Jonah, everyone in Nineveh heard the prophecy and repented. They dressed in mourning clothes and fasted. Even the animals in Nineveh were dressed in mourning clothes and repented – whatever that means! By the way, we usually accept that

the book of Jonah, unlike those of the other prophets, is ironic, to a large extent because of portions of it like the animals repenting and being dressed in mourning clothes.

We generally accept that Jonah didn't want to obey God and deliver the message of repentance because he hated the Ninevites. But there may be another reason. It may be because he thought that, if the Ninevites repented and were spared destruction, this would be done without their having been held accountable for their prior violence and harm to the Hebrews.

Accountability was an issue in South Africa, when the Apartheid regime finally was overthrown and people – particularly the majority of the population of color who had been oppressed and violated for decades – sought to achieve reconciliation with the whites so that the country could heal and move forward.

But, as Bishop Desmond Tutu observed, reconciliation cannot mean “without accountability.”

Black South Africans were trodden down by apartheid. There were those who might have claimed not to have participated in the system and ‘who might have said they were opposed to apartheid but had nonetheless gone on enjoying the privileges and huge benefits that apartheid provided them – just because of an accident of birth, a biological irrelevance, the color of their skin’.

Bridgeman, Valerie, “Jonah,” *The Africana Bible*, Fortress Press (Minneapolis, MN: 2010), p. 185.

That's why the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, headed by Bishop Tutu was created in South Africa, to hold hearings and to “balance the requirements of justice, accountability, stability, peace, and reconciliation.” (Ibid.) Through their work, changes could be made to the governmental systems, so that the country could emerge from the oppression of the past and move toward an open and free country.

With the increasing impact of the Black Lives Matter movement in our country, along with the truths raised by the 1619 Project, we might be headed for such a process in the US for the sin of racism. We of lighter skin color have maintained racist behavior against our sisters and brothers of darker color for centuries; in treatment of the Native Americans who were in this land when the first Europeans arrived; the hundreds of years of slavery and Jim Crow policies and practices, internment of Japanese Americans during the second World War; abuse of Hispanic residents, migrants and refugees, while we accepted their labor in many parts of the

economy; and all other forms of discrimination and harm that have been carried out, both officially and unofficially.

There also is mention of accountability being sought from the former President for his actions in lying about elections to foment a strong movement, among both white supremacists and “America first” shouting nationalists that incited the storming of the Capital building on January 6th. At this point, there apparently remain millions of people who feel that they have been personally defrauded with the outcomes of the recent elections.

I don't have a formula for how this should be addressed, but I continue to listen to discussions, to read, and to pray about how we can achieve reconciliation, given our legislative and political systems. And the priority for the country is dealing with bringing COVID-19 under control to stop the illness and death.

But – back to Jonah and Nineveh. It is possible that, rather than being disinclined to bring the prophecy to Nineveh because he hated the Hebrews' enemy, Jonah thought that reconciliation between the Assyrians and the Hebrews' God wasn't possible without their being held accountable for their past actions – and to make changes in their society that would promise peace with their neighbors into the future.

These thoughts also brought to mind the situation we have experienced arising out of generations of sex discrimination, bullying and sexual abuse in the workplace and otherwise. I fear that we're not doing a good job as a society of being clear about what behavior is acceptable and what is not. Don't get me wrong – I think that mistreatment has gone on for far too long. In fact, I've had my own experiences of work-related discrimination and other abuse, and I think that they should not be tolerated.

But it seems to me that people (mostly men) who engaged for years in conduct in their workplaces that they thought was acceptable because it never was questioned or criticized – in fact, because they were taught by watching others that this was how they should behave, suddenly were fired. It can be said that they should have realized that their behavior toward women was unacceptable, if for no other reason than that they didn't behave in the same way toward other men. But they – usually publicly known people – have experienced very public consequences, often without a public airing of what their offending behavior was. I assume that anyone who was fired has been told privately what the wrong behavior was. But that might not be true. And the public often doesn't know what went on, and human imagination can lead us to conclusions that are wilder than reality.

In addition, we have cultural beliefs here in the US about freedom of speech, the right to confront one's accusers and the requirement of due process, but the fact that these concepts apply to governmental action, and not to private employment relationships leaves the men who have been fired often not understanding why the things that have happened to them – have happened.

To my mind, we are finding ourselves with greater divides between us, both between individual men and women, and between groups defined politically, religiously, racially defined. We seem to have less common ground from which to reach reconciliation so that we can continue as a society – to live together in harmony. The social phenomenon of the “Me too” movement might have something to do with the political divide we are experiencing, too. Again, I don't have a recipe for how to overcome this situation, except to make sure that there are explanations for why previously acceptable behavior is now not, and education of people to prevent harassment – as we now have done mandatorily annually, at least in New York. And again, to keep this part of our lives in prayer so we continue to be open to receiving God's Spirit and influence into our interactions. Here too, there is room for accountability. And accountability is different from blame and accusation, both of which, seem to get in the way of reconciliation.

Clearly, I don't **know** what motivated Jonah. I can't tell if he was just a vindictive so-and-so, or if he **was** moved to find a new relationship between his people and the Assyrians. His story and the biblical book leave things up in the air. But it's worth thinking about how **we** approach living together. And it's always important to be moved, first of all, by God's call to each of us to love – especially our enemies.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen