



“A Tale of Two Nations”

Jonah 3:1-5

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

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Third Sunday after the Epiphany

You’ve got to love the prophet Jonah – at least I do. Jonah is not like many of the biblical characters. The Bible is filled with stories in which the characters hear God’s command and immediately obey. Moses receives God’s command and confronts an Emperor. Abraham and Sarah hear God and boldly pack up and move to a new land. Elijah stands on a mountain and alone confronts hundreds of false prophets. In today’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus walks by Peter and Andrew, calls them to follow him, and immediately they leave their business behind and follow Jesus.

But Jonah is different. He’s more like most of us. God called Jonah to be a prophet to Nineveh. Jonah immediately bought a ticket to Tarshish – as far from Nineveh as he could possibly get.

Let’s leave Jonah on the dock waiting for the ship to sail for a moment. For better than a century, people have focused on a small part of Jonah’s story – the great fish that ate Jonah and then regurgitated him - and missed the point of the book altogether.

Jonah, then and now, is intended to be a word from the Lord for God’s people, not a story about a fish. It’s the message of the book that is important. And whether you interpret the story literally, or as is more likely, a parable, the meaning is the same and profoundly unsettling.

Back on the dock in Joppa, Jonah had good reason to resist God’s call. His assignment was to go to Nineveh and speak the word of the Lord. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, the greatest power on earth at the time.

Most people in the world - except the Assyrians themselves - loathed the Assyrians. Empires and Imperial power are seldom loved beyond their national borders. But the Assyrians were hated more than most Empires.

The Assyrian Empire was famous for its cruelty in war and in peace. They were merciless to those they defeated. They slaughtered, tortured, and deported them. Sometimes they laid their enemies in fields and plowed them under the earth. They put fishhooks in the eyelids of their prisoners and led them back to Assyria. They had no friends in the world and didn’t care. They were the most powerful force in the world and the world knelt in terror.

The people of Israel knew about the Assyrians from firsthand experience. Twice the Assyrians invaded Israel with devastating results each time. The first time, Emperor Assurbanipul II invaded and deported several tribes of Israel to Nineveh. He left a record of his conquest. He reported that he build a large pillar in the center of the city in which he entombed alive some leading citizens. Others he flayed and nailed their skins to the pillar. Still others he tied to poles around the pillar to starve to death in public.

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A century later the Emperor Shalmanezzer V invaded and destroyed the nation of Israel. He deported the brightest and the best to Assyria and repopulated the land with foreigners, a horror to a people devoted to racial purity.

It's no wonder Jonah did not want to travel to Assyria with a word from the Lord, no matter what that word might be. In his opinion God shouldn't be on speaking terms with Assyria. He likely wished God would give them a good dose of fire and brimstone.

Who can blame him? His moral outrage is justified by any accounting. A terrible Empire had destroyed his people, God's people, mind you, with cruel efficiency. Surely Assyria was God's enemy, too. The slightest moral vision would insist on retribution as a matter of justice.

So, Jonah headed to Tarshish away from Assyria and away from God's claim on his life. You probably know the story, at least the first part of the story.

God's fleeing prophet didn't get far. A deadly storm threatened the ship he was on. The sailors blamed Jonah's God – and Jonah – for the storm. They threw Jonah overboard, and he was swallowed by a great fish, only to be vomited up on the shore back where he started the voyage.

Now that God had Jonah's attention, God told him a second time to head for Nineveh with a word from the Lord for the Assyrian people. Interestingly, we are not told what God's word for Assyria might be.

Jonah headed toward Assyria reluctantly, feet dragging every step of the way, dreading what lay before him. When he arrived, he began preaching on street corners and in the marketplace. Jonah's message, his understanding of God's word for Assyria, was quite simple. It's sheer prophetic thunder. "You have forty days to repent – or face the judgment of God!"

Imagine the scene. A Jew from an insignificant spot on the map of the Empire dared to stand up and confront the most powerful Empire the world had known. It's easy to imagine how the Assyrian people would react. "How dare this Israelite, a citizen of weak and utterly defeated people, say to us that the triumphs of our Empire are evil, that our national program in the world is the work of evil forces, that our gods are nothing."

Yet there he is, the prophet from Israel, proclaiming in the name of the God of Israel, "My God is the true God. My people are right, and you are the enemies of God and to top it off, you are about to be destroyed."

There are no contemporary analogies, but try to imagine Gandhi marching through the streets of London denouncing the British Empire and demanding the King and Parliament repent of their violence, oppression, and other assorted Imperial evils. I suspect the citizens of London would not be amused.

Or, closer to home, imagine an Iraqi Imam showing up at the inauguration Tuesday and loudly shouting that America is doing the work of the Devil, and that our God is a false God. He'd be shouted down, and if not placed in custody quickly, likely get beaten up.

The powers that be, whether good or evil, do not appreciate being confronted in public and told they are dead wrong – or evil, especially if the message comes in the name of any god.

Meanwhile, Jonah continued his mission, likely looking forward to watching the impending fire and brimstone display from outside town. Justice would be served on these cruel Assyrian monsters. Oh, it would be a satisfying moment.

To Jonah's utter astonishment, and perhaps ours as well, the entire city of Nineveh spontaneously repented, acknowledged the God of Israel as the true God, and begged

God for forgiveness. From the king to the street sweepers, the people wore sackcloth and ashes and received God's grace. It's an unbelievably positive response to a totally negative message.

This week I watched a rerun of an old Billy Graham crusade. He's the master evangelist of our time, and knows enough to make his message of sin and repentance positive. As always, his sermon focused on the peace, joy, and love that come from a relationship with God. Sin and repentance were there but accompanied, even overwhelmed, by the offer of God's grace to all. When he gave the invitation, hundreds of people moved from their seats to the front for prayer. I've watched it dozens of times, and is always an amazing sight.

Well, old Jonah never got to the grace of God. He preached wrath, gave the invitation, and the entire city came to the front for prayer. It's not what Jonah expected, but was apparently what God had in mind.

This did not please the prophet Jonah. He turned his anger from the Assyrians toward God. "Good God," he yelled, "you're supposed to destroy this evil empire. How dare you spare them? Have you no sense of justice? How can you let good things happen to bad people?"

Now, according to the story, the real reason for Jonah's reluctance is unmasked. In a moment of ironic honesty, Jonah cries to God again, "I knew you'd do this. It's why I fled in the first place. I know you are a gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. How can you do this to me? Just kill me. I'd rather be dead than see my mortal enemy – and yours too, mind you – receive mercy, not judgment."

It seems the prophet who'd received God's undeserved mercy, and had been called a second time to ministry, was not willing to let God give mercy to people who didn't meet the prophet's approval.

The story ends with Jonah sitting outside the city, still hoping for fire and brimstone, and still arguing with God. Jonah sat under a large bush to protect him from the brutal heat of the middle eastern sun. The bush withered and died, and Jonah blamed God. He, a good son of Abraham who deserves better, gets nothing. A city of cruel pagans who deserve punishment, receive mercy. It's just not right.

"Well, Jonah," God replies, "you care very much about that bush. Shouldn't I care about 120,000 people in Nineveh who don't know their right hand from their left?" The end!

The point of the book is clear. It's a message to God's people challenging our smug self-righteousness that assumes we are right and everyone else is wrong, that God loves us best.

The book of Jonah declares that all nations are accountable to God and will be judged for their behavior. Nineveh was guilty of cruel violence against their neighbors. The powerful nations of the world tend to overpower and violate the weak nations, and the prophets of God proclaim such behavior will be judged.

Jonah and the rest of the prophets challenge all nationalism whether the nation is Israel, Assyria, or America. Nationalism, by its nature, distorts the primary vision of the people of God. God is committed to all people, and our allegiances must be adjusted to God's vision.

Public policy and church commitments must be guided by God's policies and commitments. The question is always, "How do we treat people for whom Christ died?" The church exists to be the conscience, heart, and soul of any nation.

Nationalism along with every political, economic, or social ideology tends to lack the capacity for self-criticism. We quickly become smug, judgmental, and blind to matters of the heart and soul. Many Americans talk and act as if the United States is our savior.

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I must tell you I was proud to be an American this week. Tuesday night my brother called, and we shared our amazement. We recalled growing up in the virulent racism of southern Ohio and how we left thinking things would never change.

But things did change. There wasn't much repentance along the way but things changed. But I must say to progressives who welcome this national change and new administration, President Obama is not our savior. In our moment of exuberance, let us not develop a new smug self-righteousness that accuses others and cannot be self-critical.

Remember, God told Jonah, "You care very much about that bush. Shouldn't I care very much for the Assyrians?" The point is, we should too.

Amen.

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