

<i>Date Preached</i>	20-Sept-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	06-Sept-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Pr 20, Yr A (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>			

" And should I not be concerned about Nineveh? "



A reading from the Book of Jonah! As I turned to this week's lessons, I have to admit my heart leapt just a little bit, for we almost *never* hear Jonah read in church. It's one of the most fun, most memorable and most accessible books in the Bible—a great story line, some excellent special effects, and a highly relatable protagonist. And if you were to ask many folks about the stories in the Old Testament they remember most, Jonah would be right up there ... after Adam and Eve ... with Joseph and his multi-colored coat; Noah and the ark; and David and Goliath.

But ... for all its seeming familiarity, the Book of Jonah, as a whole, is really a pretty contrary book. Much like the longer-laboring-but-identically-paid workers in the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel lesson, Jonah ... for all his aquatic derring-do and his verbal histrionics ... Jonah really serves as a foil for God and God's ways: Jonah knows the ways of God and, from the outset, suspects he *also* knows God's intent. But he doesn't want to acknowledge how *opposite* those are to what he feels in his own heart ... and perhaps we feel in ours, as well.

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The Book of Jonah is a flash-back, of sorts: Although written centuries later, the story is set in the eighth century before Christ. Jonah is a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel—the larger, more prosperous division of what briefly had been, under Kings David and Solomon, the *united* Kingdom of Israel. The northern division became known (rather confusingly, for those of us who came along later) as Israel, and the southern became known as Judah.

At the time of the story of Jonah, Nineveh—where God wants Jonah to preach—was a very large, cosmopolitan city along the Tigris River in modern-day Iraq; it was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. And this is a vital fact, for in the year 722 (well after Jonah's time), the Assyrians overran the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deported its people, destroying the North forever. The authors and intended audience of the story of Jonah know that Nineveh is evil incarnate: a debauched, blood-thirsty, rapacious city filled with those harboring only evil designs for Israel ... and Jonah seems to know this, too.

With this background, we can rather quickly summarize the book's plot. God calls Jonah ... out of the blue, it seems ... and tells him to go preach to the people of Nineveh, for "their wickedness has come before me," God tells Jonah. Without saying a word in response ... but suspecting he already *knows* God's plan to spare Nineveh ... Jonah flees, setting sail for either southern Turkey or even southern Spain (the Hebrew is unclear), both of which lie in the opposite direction of Nineveh. While he is at sea, great storms arise and threaten the ship Jonah is sailing on, and its crew casts him overboard. God, as we all know, sends a great fish to rescue Jonah. After three days in the fish's belly, the fish spits (*vomits* is the literal translation) Jonah out upon the shore, and God again commands him to go preach to Nineveh.

This time, Jonah grudgingly obeys, but just barely: The entirety of his prophecy to Nineveh is "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown"—all of five words in Hebrew. But, rather miraculously, those words do the trick. The king of Nineveh immediately decrees that every person and animal in his kingdom shall fast, don sackcloth and "cry mightily to God": a rather amazing tableau—sheep in sackcloth and ashes, baaa-ing to the Lord—but one that emphasizes the depth of nasty Nineveh's sincere repentance. And it works! God sees the turn-about of the city and decides not to bring about the ruin God had planned to visit upon it.

And here is where today's lesson picks up the thread: Jonah is now truly outraged. Not only has the poster child for bad neighborliness ... the Death Star of the Ancient Near East, as it were ... been redeemed by God, but God also has made *Jonah* the very agent of its salvation! As one commentator puts it, God's asking Jonah, a citizen of the Northern Kingdom, to tell Nineveh—the very people who will eventually *obliterate* the Kingdom—how to save itself from God's wrath is akin to a Jew's having been asked, right after the end of World War II, to go on a mission to save Germany. It's unthinkable, from our perspective, and Jonah ... who is not exactly given to trembling and cringing before God ... lets God know that this was *exactly* the outcome Jonah had foreseen; had feared; and had wanted no part of. He would rather die, he tells God no less than three times, than see God rescue Nineveh from perdition.

And yet, it is God who gets the last word. Or rather, I should say, God gets the last *question*. For God doesn't chastise Jonah for his lack of charity, or thunder about God's own sovereignty to run the world any way God likes. No, the Book of Jonah ends enigmatically, with a series of questions for Jonah ... and the Israelites ... and, ultimately, us ... to ponder: "If you, Jonah, can care about a silly little bush you did nothing to create or maintain, how can *I* not care about my own people—even those who hate and destroy those whom I love? Why should I not be concerned about a city teeming with people who are otherwise helpless to avoid My wrath? What grounds do you have, Jonah, to tell Me *either* that I should not save them ... *or* that you, as one of My own, won't help Me do so? Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?" asks God.

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It all comes down to a question of fairness, it seems to me. The reason Jonah flees the Lord's first command to go save Nineveh ... and the reason he just *barely* carries out his charge when God gives him a second chance ... is that God's plan just doesn't seem fair. Jonah, as a character in history, knows, like all other eighth-century citizens of Israel, what an evil, avaricious, unhinged society Nineveh is. It has amassed huge power in the region and deploys it ruthlessly against its neighbors, including Israel. It is an unrepentant city-state bent on conquering or controlling everything in its path. And stepping outside the narrative, the author of the Book of Jonah and its intended audience *also* know that Nineveh ultimately destroyed the Kingdom of Israel, forever. How can it be God's plan to save Nineveh at all ... *let alone* via the words of a prophet chosen from the very people doomed for destruction at Nineveh's hands? "Where is the justice? How can this possibly be fair?" we are surely meant to ask.

And this, my friends, is *precisely* the point the author of Jonah is trying to make: The fairness of God is *not* the fairness of humans. We conceive of fairness in terms of consequences. Our pleas for fairness are sometimes pitched in a *moral* key that looks to the rightness of behavior: How is it *fair* for God to save ... reward, even ... a marauding kingdom of depraved, heedless warriors? And sometimes in a *distributive* key that emphasizes parallel treatment: How is it fair for

the owner to pay someone who worked an hour the same amount as someone who worked ten?  
... or for God to grant the same justification and eternal life to someone who makes a deathbed confession as to someone who's given her entire life—maybe even her entire fortune—to the church?

The flaw in the logic of *human* fairness, it seems to me, is that it countenances *losers* as well as winners; justifies certain people's choices or attitudes or even circumstances as grounds for their being *excluded* from the good God offers the world, in Christ. But God's logic *doesn't countenance losers*. Fairness for God, however paradoxical it may sound to our ears, is that everybody wins ... that no one is left out ... that each is afforded countless opportunities to know God's love, and completely ... regardless of her goodness and irrespective of his labors.

God's fairness, I acknowledge, is turned 180 degrees away from the ways of this world; it can make sense only if, in St Paul's words today, we genuinely come to see that "living is Christ and dying is gain." But as we grow in our faith ... as we come to embrace more and more *God's* idea of fairness ... as we learn to relish the opportunity to preach salvation to our enemies and to reward the willingness to undertake, as well as the creation of value ... we become the Christ Who lives within us, the Christ God wants us to be.



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