

TO NINEVEH AND BEYOND, III
THE LOVE OF GOD

Last week we left poor Jonah on the beach, having just been coughed up by the great fish that had swallowed him whole. Hardly a pretty picture! Right back where he started when he tried to escape God's call. As he struggles to his feet, he no doubt, begins to clean himself off. Maybe he takes a dip in the Mediterranean to wash off all the fish gunk. Maybe he heads to the nearest YMHA to take a shower, whatever. The bottom line is that in the midst of his sanitizing, the voice of God thunders once again. It is like a do-over, a second chance. The narrator even uses the same words to introduce the chapter: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah" (Jonah 3:1a) And the message is the same as before. Go to Nineveh, and tell them they are in hot water. They have been exceedingly wicked, and they are about to pay for it!

As we've seen, Jonah isn't an example of a perfectly obedient servant of God. But he's also not stupid. And he has come to the realization that unless he wants to face more storms and near drownings and times in the belly of a fish, or whatever else God may have up the divine sleeve, he'd better do as he's told. So he heads off to Nineveh. Despite his reservations about carrying such a negative message to the capital city of such a powerful enemy. Despite his fears and concerns. And so he heads off.

But when he gets to Nineveh, he doesn't exactly throw his heart and soul into his mission. The story teller often uses exaggeration to make his point and so it is here. Nineveh is a great city, we are told. The original Hebrew suggests even God is impressed with its size! And it would take three days to walk from one side of it to the other. How many miles can you walk in a day? Ten, fifteen, twenty? This is a big, big city--maybe sixty miles across! But the specific size is unimportant. As one scholar notes, "[We] are not supposed to do arithmetic. [We] are supposed to be lost in astonishment" (Hans Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 148)

Whatever the specific size, Jonah begins his work. But not exactly with enthusiasm. He only goes a day's walk. A third of the way through. Almost as if he's going to say what he needs to say, and then turn around and beat it out of there as fast as his little prophet's feet will take him.

"Forty days," he shouts, "Just forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Maybe two or three more times for good measure, and then he begins to make his exit. Frightened as he is, he secretly is hoping they will ignore his warning, and go about their usual evil ways--cheating one another in business dealings, ignoring the orphans and widows, partying all night in

drunken orgies, whatever their sinful behaviors. That way they will be destroyed. “Good riddance! That would make his effort worth the risk. But before he gets very far, much to his surprise, much to his chagrin, the people actually listen to him! And they believe God! And immediately everyone who hears him, bigwigs and little guys alike, engage in a fast. A traditional way of showing regret and begging for mercy. They even put on sackcloth--something like burlap--and cover themselves in ashes. They go full bore!

The king is safely ensconced in his palace, but his men and women on the street, hear the gossip--nobody can gossip like a worried Ninevite--and once they’ve ascertained that this business about imminent destruction isn’t fake news, they rush to the throne room and inform the king. And he too is immediately moved to action. He gets up from his comfy throne, throws off his ermine and velvet cape, puts on his own burlap sack, and plops himself down in a pile of ash. And then, from this place of humility, he offers up an edict. There is to be a citywide fast. Everybody is to refrain from eating. No bread, no cake, no lamb chops and mint jelly, nothing! And nothing to drink--not even a Diet Coke! Nothing. Not even take out and drive thrus. Even the animals are to fast. And they are also to be covered in sackcloth. It’s a complete lockdown of sorts. And it is to last for three days. And those days are to be used wisely and well. Prayers are to be lifted up to this powerful God Jonah represents. Save us from destruction, Mighty One! And those prayers are to be matched by action and resolve. “All shall turn from their evil ways,” proclaims the king, “and from the violence that is in their hands.” (3:8b) Then he turns to the members of his court, and with worry in his voice, he offers a bit of hope. “Maybe God will relent and change his mind,” (3:9a) he says. Or as Eugene Peterson translates, “Maybe God will turn around and change his mind about us, quit being angry with us and let us live!” (*The Message*, 1667)

And then comes the real pivotal point of the whole story. “When God saw what [the Ninevites]did,” says the narrator, “how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it.” (3:10)

Obviously, there are some theological assumptions in this story with which you and I would probably take exception. The idea that God micromanages our lives, for instance. Or the notion that God would kill off what we are later told is a population of 120,000 people. Still, remembering that this is a fictional story, there are some important truths contained within its exaggerations and twists of plot.

For instance, note how the people of Nineveh avert disaster--by acting together. By willingly engaging in unpleasant and disruptive actions in order to save their own lives and those of their neighbors. And note that it is a comprehensive set of actions. Everyone must do their part, says the king. Everyone. And they do. In many ways it sounds like the crisis we are currently facing, doesn’t it? Don’t misunderstand, I do not think the coronavirus is some sort

of divine punishment. But I do think it is a something that we must all be willing to address. I do think it is a crisis that will require each of us to do our part. Out of concern for ourselves, and out of love for our neighbors.

The Jonah story doesn't say that every single resident of Nineveh is wicked. Just that Nineveh is a place where there is a great deal of evil. No doubt there were innocent people in that great city. Men and women who lived lives of compassion and justice. But they too were called upon to engage in the fast and the prayers. Even the most certainly innocent animals are to wear sackcloth!

So too with the coronavirus. We are all in it together. Apparently certain folks are at a much lower risk of suffering the ill-effects of Covid19 if they contract it. Some may even be asymptomatic. But they too need to be part of the overall effort. In part, because there are things about it that we don't yet fully understand. And in part, out of concern for their imperiled neighbors. As one educator said, you may not need to protect yourself, but by following the various guidelines you are "protecting your grandmother . . ." We all need to be part of the solution!

There is a second important truth contained in this part of the Jonah story which applies in this and every day. God truly cares about all people. Even those we have deemed the enemy. And we are called to do the same. Jonah had little use for the Ninevites. They frightened him, disgusted him, seemed worthless to him. But God ultimately demonstrates that even Ninevites are loved.

One of the things that concerns me the most with this current crisis is the tendency we have as human beings to see others as the enemy. Those who engage in conspiracy theories are currently bandying around the idea that the virus was intentionally created by the Chinese or perhaps the Iranians to bring about the ruin of the West. There is absolutely no proof, none whatsoever, of such a false idea. But there are folks, including a dear friend of mine, who quickly grab onto such theories. We need to guard against such nonsense, and one of the ways we can do that is by not only reminding ourselves, but also reminding others, that God cares about all people. Even Ninevites. Even Iranians and Russians and the Chinese. For this virus knows no borders. This is not a Chinese virus, it is a global virus. Yes, it may indeed be prudent to shut down international travel, to restrict entry into our nation, even as other nations do the same. But we do that not to protect ourselves from those we perceive to be enemies, but rather to slow or even eventually stop, the spread of the virus itself.

In the Jonah story God is said to "change God's mind about the calamity" and stops it before it happens. In our day, and in our time, you and I probably do not blame God for this tragic set of circumstances. We don't need to change God's mind. Rather we need to use the

minds God has given us, the hearts God has given us, to resolve the problem. And if we work together across all the lines that normally divide us, we are more than likely in a position to change the course of this calamity, this crisis. All of us. Working together. Each doing our part. For in the end the best way to take care of ourselves, and those we know well, is to be willing to take care of all people.

With that kind of love, action-based love, agape love, the love of God, we can endure. We can indeed.

Amen

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