



From the Pulpit: July 23, 2023

sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Jonah 4

Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, IX: The Inescapable Love of God

Today is the ninth and last sermon in a series called, Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, about the slim books of Ruth and Jonah. I am reading from Jonah, chapters 3 and 4:

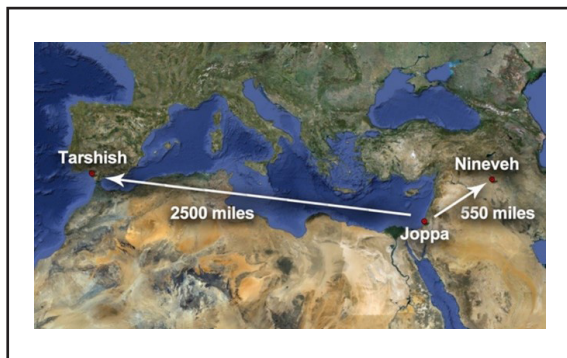
Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

But God said to Jonah, "should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals.

God wants Jonah to preach repentance to Nineveh, Israel's archenemy and the Sin City of the Ancient Near East. Jonah doesn't want to preach hope and grace to his bitterest foe so he runs away. After God intervenes with some gentle persuasions, however, Jonah eventually, finally, gets to Nineveh.



When he gets there, he lets loose with the shortest sermon on record: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." That's it: eight words in English, five in Hebrew; an eight-word

sermon that is remarkably successful for such a reluctant and petulant preacher.

The entire city of Nineveh, from greatest to least, does a swift 180 and relinquishes its former evil deeds.

God—that old softy with the bleeding heart—is so happy God changes God's mind and decides to bless rather than damn the great city with its 120,000 human souls, "and also many animals," as the Bible so quaintly puts it. Jonah saves the day, and the city.

But when Jonah learns that God is not going to torch the great city of Nineveh as God did with Sodom and Gomorrah, he "got very angry," as the NRSV puts it.

Literally, the Hebrew reads "Jonah burned." Then as now, the instinctive human metaphor for anger is heat, fire, flame, and conflagration. He's mad as hell and he's not going to take it anymore. Jonah is the only preacher we know about who is irritated with the success of

his own preaching.

And now for the first time, near the end of the story, we learn why Jonah sailed 2,500 miles WEST to Tarshish instead of hiking 500 miles NORTHEAST to Nineveh like God wanted him to. At the beginning of the story we never learned precisely why Jonah refused to do what God had asked him to do. But now we find out.

Listen to what he says: “O Lord, isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew you were a gracious God, and merciful, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Now just let me die. I would rather be dead than live in a world where such people as the Ninevites get a second chance.

“I knew it,” he says. “I just knew this was going to happen. That’s just the way you are, God—you old softy with the bleeding heart.”

Jonah describes God as “gracious, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love.” Over the generations it had become the terse précis of Israel’s understanding of God: “gracious, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love.” And Jonah doesn’t like it. Jonah would rather **die** than live in a world where such people as the Ninevites get a second chance.

And now look how God responds to Jonah’s shabby surliness. God doesn’t respond in kind. God doesn’t lash out at Jonah’s pinch-penny petulance. Quietly, gently, staying in his chair, as they say, God simply asks Jonah, “Is it good for you to be angry?”

In other words, “Is your anger serving your needs?” Doesn’t God sound just like your therapist? Your therapist doesn’t tell you you’re acting ridiculous. Your therapist doesn’t tell you you’re behaving like a child. She just asks you pointed questions.

When you seethe and rage and heap a pile of justified disdain and profane invectives on the head of your ex because he abandoned you or cheated on you or ignored you, she doesn’t say, “O pulLEASE, get over yourself, will you!?! BORING! Your ancient rage is so tedious!” No, she doesn’t say that. She says, “Is your anger helpful? Is it getting you what you want? Is it serving your needs?”

“God
—that old softy
with the bleeding
heart—”

Does anybody watch this HBO show *Shrinking* with Harrison Ford and Jason Segal as therapists in practice together? I’m so intrigued by their therapist colleague Gaby. She is odd and troubled and out of control, but she is so funny and so wise and so kind and so compassionate. She’s my image of God. I can hear her saying, “Jonah, is your anger helpful? Is it getting you what you want?”

Some anonymous but gifted author with an eccentric imagination wrote the story of Jonah to show us that God loves Assyrians just as much as God loves Jews. God wants to welcome all of us home in the end.

And this was an absurd idea in its day; it was very much a minority report. When Jonah was written, most Jews thought that God was God to Jews alone.

Scholars think the Book of Jonah was written about 400 years before Jesus, when the prevailing ethos among the Jews was the specialness and the privilege of being Jews, God’s Chosen People. Strong, exclusive ethnic identity marked by rigid observance of the ancient rituals—circumcision, Kosher diet, Sabbath observance, and never, ever intermarriage with Gentiles, not ever. No mongrels, no mud-bloods, as Draco Malfoy might put it. Just pure Jews.

These ideas are all through much of the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. Ruth and Jonah stand almost alone in their counter witness to the majority report. Ruth and Jonah are the three liberal Supreme Court Justices who keep getting outvoted by the six conservatives.

Corporal Anthony Benedetto was 19 years old when he fought his way across France during the Battle of the Bulge in January of 1945. When Germany surrendered in May, Corporal Benedetto stayed on in the devastated country. He was a good singer, so he spent his time entertaining the occupying troops.

On Thanksgiving Day of that year, 1945, the Corporal ran into Frank Smith, an old friend he'd sung with in high school in New York. Frank Smith was black. As you might guess, Corporal Benedetto was Italian American.

Frank invited Anthony to Thanksgiving services at a Baptist church. After church, Anthony and Frank were on their way to a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for the troops when an officer started hurling obscenities at the two of them. The officer came up to Anthony and ripped his Corporal stripes off his uniform with a razor blade, spit on them, and threw them on the floor.

In 1945, you see, white American soldiers could fraternize with German civilians or even with Nazis, but they could not be seen together in public with their Black fellow soldiers. These two soldiers, one Black and one white, had spent the last six months rescuing skeletal, half-dead Jews from Nazi concentration camps.

And now you know why Tony Bennett marched with Harry Belafonte and Martin Luther King, Jr., from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.¹

Ruth and Jonah tell us that God's love is more comprehensive and more global than we dare to hope or sometimes even *want*. It is, in fact, inescapable. There is always another chance, even for those we don't think deserve it.

God is "gracious, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love." That love is especially drawn to the wayward, the wandering, the wicked, the weak, the wan, and the weird. Every once in a while you see a faint reflection of that steadfast love here on earth.

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Do you know about the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp? Paul Newman founded it in 1988 and established it in northeastern Connecticut for children with life-threatening illness?

New Yorker writer Calvin Trillin tells us that his wife Alice volunteered there and every summer sort of gravitated to the children in the camp who needed the most help, and one summer that child was Lucy.

Lucy had two different genetic diseases: one which kept her from growing and another which kept her from digesting her food. She was fed at night through a tube and had so much difficulty walking that most days Alice drove her around the camp in a golf cart. These were special times for Alice and for Lucy.

One morning Lucy retrieved her mail from the camp post office and then joined a game of "duck-duck-goose." Lucy asked Alice Trillin to hold her mail for her while she took her turn to be chased around the circle.

As you might imagine, it took Lucy a long time to make her trip around the circle, and while Lucy was making her halting way, Alice Trillin had time to notice the note from Lucy's mother on top of the pile of mail.

¹Dave Kindy, "Tony Bennett saw racism and horror in World War II. It changed him," *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2023.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

“Then,” says Alice, “I did something truly awful. I simply had to know what this child’s parents could have done to make her so spectacular, to make her the most optimistic, most enthusiastic, most hopeful human being I had ever encountered. I snuck a quick look at the note, and my eyes fell on this sentence: ‘If God had given us all of the children of the world to choose from, Lucy, we would have chosen you.’”

“Before Lucy got back to her place on the circle, I showed the note to Bud, who was sitting next to me. ‘Quick, read this,’ I whispered, ‘It’s the secret of life.’”²

Do you get it? Do you understand? Like a mother loves her children, all of them, God loves the world with a restless, reckless ache that nothing ever be lost, nothing whatsoever in the world. Doesn’t matter if you’re from Nineveh or Jerusalem. Doesn’t matter if you’re whole or disabled. “If God had given us all the children of the world to choose from, Lucy, we would have chosen you.” That is the secret of life.

God of inescapable wonder and delight,
Creator of this enchanted summer
In which we welcome ripe raspberries,
The first taste of heirloom tomatoes,
And the soothing evening breeze across the balcony.
Keep us awake to the new life arriving in our midst:
A family moving in down the street,
The person we have not met sitting
 near us this morning,
A new minister to serve here,
And of course, the blessing of new babies
 to love and nurture.

Make us people of welcome and compassion
 in a weary world.
Keep us awake to the needs of our neighbor:
The one recovering from surgery,
The relationships that need tending,
The grief that keeps a timeline all its own,
The tenderness of the unresolved conflict,
And the work that needs to be set aside for rest,
Holy God,
Teach us how to walk in the way of love and peace
 every moment of our days.

For you O God, are the God of
 Ruth, Naomi, Jonah, and the Ninevites.
You’re the one who makes a way for the
 forgotten, the fallen, and even the impertinent.
Grant us your spirit of wisdom and understanding,
That we might see the world more as you see it:
A place of wonder and of need,
Where your son Jesus Christ dwelt among us
Bringing light and life to all,
Showing us the way of justice and truth,
And teaching us to pray: Our father....

²Slightly adapted from Calvin Trillin, “Alice, Off the Page,” *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2006, pp. 55–56.

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