

SECOND READING: Jonah 3-4 (portions)

THEN the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Arise, go to Nin’evah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup>So Jonah arose and went to Nin’evah, according to the word of the LORD....And he cried, “Yet forty days, and Nin’evah shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nin’evah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.

But this displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup>And he prayed to the LORD and said, “I KNEW that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. <sup>3</sup>Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup>And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?” <sup>5</sup>Then Jonah went out of the city, and made a booth for himself there...<sup>6</sup>And the LORD God appointed a plant,<sup>[a]</sup> and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm which attacked the plant,<sup>[c]</sup> so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint; and he asked that he might die, ...<sup>10</sup>And the LORD said, “You pity the plant,<sup>[e]</sup> for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow.... <sup>11</sup>And should not I pity Nin’evah, 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?”

This is the word of the Lord...

**READING OF THE PSALM (PSALM 62:5-12) (responsive):**

*For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.*

**<sup>6</sup>He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.**

*On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.*

**Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us**

*Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.*

**Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.**

### *“Called to Love”*

Jonah, good ‘ole Jonah. In this allegory, or satire, or parable....in this favorite piece of holy scripture, Jonah has some lessons to learn... as do we. If you recall, prior to where our reading begins today, God had asked Jonah to go to Ninevah to deliver a message of warning to those living there, a message to repent of their sinful ways. Ninevah was a large city, the capital of Assyria, and the Ninevites were a violent and brutal people who had conquered many peoples. They were the enemy, a real threat to Israel. One historian has said, *“There seemed to be no act of cruelty which these conquerors had not employed!”*<sup>1</sup> Jonah had reason to fear them. He had reason to hate them. And so, he ran as fast as he could from his prophetic assignment, and he ran from the Lord who issued it. Never a good thing to do. He boarded a ship sailing to Tarshish, the exact opposite direction from Ninevah. But on the ship, things went wrong. A huge storm came up and threatened to sink it. The crew members threw Jonah overboard, and the sea stopped raging. Then the Lord sent a fish to save Jonah and he lived in that fish’s belly for 3 days and 3 nights, after which the Lord made it to spit him out on dry land.

And where was that dry land? Yes, near Ninevah. This is where our reading this morning begins. God came a second time to him (important words...A SECOND TIME). God repeated God’s original call for Jonah to go to Ninevah, and this time, Jonah obeyed, but still his heart wasn’t in it. He walked the shortest distance through the huge city that he could, and he delivered the shortest sermon ever...8 words! He said, *“Yet forty days, and Nin’evah shall be overthrown!”* (repeat) And, if there’s ever proof that God can do wonderful things with the sermon of a flawed preacher, it’s here. The Ninevites, who knew nothing of Israel’s God, repented. They changed. All of them. They put sackcloth and ashes on, and they turned from their sinful, evil ways. God was moved. God’s wide and deep mercy was kindled, and God decided not to punish them.

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<sup>1</sup> David Anderson. *“Ninevah, the Most Cruel Capitol”* In: Capitol Commission. <http://www.capitolcom.org/virginia/studies /947/2012/05/31/intro-to-jonah-nineveh-the-most-cruel-capital>. (accessed 1/20/18).

Ah, but Jonah, he couldn't stand it. He didn't rejoice in God's merciful response. He instead got angry, "exceedingly" angry. "*Why, O why would God show God's mercy to these horrible, strange, non-chosen, non-enlightened Ninevites?*" How could God love the people that Jonah hated? Jonah left the city and built himself a little tent, under which he could sit and sulk. And God, with, what I imagine divine eyes rolling and saying, "*Really Jonah?*", raised up a tree to further shade him. But the next day God caused this tree to die, and Jonah confronted God. He asked that he might die. Then God delivered the one-two punch, "*You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, ...And should not I pity Nin'evah, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left?*"

You know, I think there's a number of lessons here in this wonderful OT whale of a tale, but there's one thing, one question that sticks out above the others, one question we need ask ourselves, and it is a serious one. It is "*What do we want for our enemies?*"<sup>2</sup> *What do we want God to do FOR or TO those people who are our adversaries, who personally have hurt us, who threaten us, who say bad things about us behind our backs, who bully and frighten us, who make our lives miserable? On a larger scale, what do we want God do FOR or TO those who hurt our families, our friends, our communities, our countries?...What do we want for those who these days have no regard for truth, who advocate violence and racism and sexism, who put partisan loyalty above all else and do such harm to the poor, the weak, the hungry, the young, the old, the voiceless? Well, Jonah wanted God to judge and destroy ones such as these. He wanted revenge. But he found that God's intention was different. God wanted to change their lives, and **God wanted Jonah to help in the process!** Jonah was being called to love those he knew to be sinners, to help heal those who were Israel's enemies, to work to break down the walls that divide. God was saying to Jonah, "*You are my child, and they are my children. I am calling you to love them as I love you. Believe in my power to change.*"*

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Rennigan. Sermon: "*Oh, Jonah He Lived in a Whale.*" <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b09-2-third-sunday-epiphany-year-b/n> (accessed 1-19-24).

Jesus too, when he began his ministry called for repentance, for change, for people to go in a different direction, to embrace a new life that he was all about. He called his disciples to leave their old lives and follow him because the kingdom of heaven was near. Most of us say or at least want to say, *“I will go wherever you lead me, Jesus.”* But do we know that that means he will ask us to go to the ones who make us angry and love them? Do we know that that means he will ask us to bring our adversaries the good news of forgiveness, that we will be used as agents of reconciliation, ones through whom Jesus works to offer blessing? *(pause)* In a letter to Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton wrote, *“Our calling is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody’s business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can.”*<sup>3</sup>

Another question we need ask ourselves after reading this wonderful OT tale is this: “What then do we do with our anger?” *(repeat)* Because friends, our anger, itself, is not the problem. It’s what we do with it that is. Rev. Joanna Adams says, *“Anger is a natural response to threat and danger. A hungry baby is right to scream. But anger as self-importance, anger excessively expressed, anger which is unwilling to be dissolved, THAT is when the sinful part comes in”*.<sup>4</sup> As Paul says, *“Be angry, but do not sin.”* (Eph 4:26). Jonah’s anger resulted in arrogant self-pity. He wished that 120,000 people should die, and that was wrong. God’s original anger with the Ninevites was not an end to itself. No, it was grounded in love and so it worked for the purposes of redemption and reconciliation.<sup>5</sup> It changed when they responded with humble and pure desire to repent.

I love the story about *an old Cherokee grandfather who was teaching his grandson about life: “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf is evil—he IS anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he IS joy, peace, love, hope,*

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Amy Starr-Redwine. Sermon. “The Third Sunday after the Epiphany.” <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Amy-Starr-Redwine-3rd-Sunday-after-the-Epiphany-January-24-2021-Jonah.pdf>. (accessed 1-19-24).

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Adams. “Sermon: Count to Ten”.

<sup>5</sup> Joanna Adams. “Sermon: Count to Ten”.

*serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked: “Grandfather, which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”*<sup>6</sup>

Friends, our God’s plan is to heal the broken world and gather it unto Godself. We are invited to be part of the working out of this plan. It’s a hard but privileged calling. Sometimes a bit daunting. But we need remember that we do not do it alone. We are not intended to do it alone. God in Christ comes a second, third, fourth...as many times as it takes...to help us step into the calling. God never ever gives up on our enemies, but God does not give up on us, either. It’s grace. It’s pure grace.

*God is calling us to Nineveh, to that place and that people we cannot imagine are worthy of God’s love or our time. God is calling us to love them with the kind of love that does not stop to ask whether they are deserving of it. We can run from that call or outright refuse it, but imagine what might happen if we with God at our side, dared to accept it.*<sup>7</sup>

*May it be so. Amen.*

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<sup>6</sup> D Yeong. “*The Fight of Two Wolves*” <https://deanyeong.com/fight-two-wolves-inside/>. (accessed 1/18/18).

<sup>7</sup> Amy Starr-Redwine.