

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

JONAH 3:1-5, 10

PSALM 62:5-12

I CORINTHIANS 7:29-31

MARK 1:14-20

January 21, 2024

### ***A Parable for Our Time!***

**What to do about Ninevites? What do you do with Ninevites, because we have a Ninevite problem, a real risk of a Ninevite infestation. We live in constant fear, a communal anxiety produced by worrying about an unwanted, unwarranted, invasion? What to do? What to do? What shall we do? Once upon a time the Israelites were threatened by numerous enemies, more adversaries than they could stand! Yes, the past seems like an endless spin cycle, continuing to repeat itself in the present over and over and over again! Repetition and redundancy is more than a literary problem in the Near or Middle East. According to biblical lore, after crossing the Jordan River and carrying out numerous battles as they seized their new homeland, Israel had faced off against numerous foes, the book of Deuteronomy (20:10-18) offering a great example of a literary genre all its own called a *herem* text: “When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. And when the Lord God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus, you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here. But as for the towns of the peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites—(evidently every “ite” but the parasites) just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.” The word of the Lord! NOT! This is nothing more than a call to genocide, blessed permission! Not suitable for Sunday morning or any day of the week! And yet,**

here it is, unfortunately laying some very bad groundwork, an obscene precedent for those who might ever decide to take these words at face value.

**According to the Bible the Israelites had once been subjected to the indentured life, serving as slaves in the land of Pharaoh, Egypt a place that had turned from a land of rescue in the time of Joseph to a land of bondage that knew not Joseph. In 587 BCE they had been taken into captivity at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, forced to live in exile in Babylon, remaining there long enough for that foreign culture to become familiar and to rub off on them, significantly impacting their traditions, as they intermingled in various and permanent ways. Through it all they had survived, even thrived on occasion, a remnant always outlasting every challenging threat their sundry tormentors could throw their way. The Israelites lived a constant tension, a continuous struggle, between tolerating aliens, foreigners, strangers, those often categorized, dismissed as the “other”, and on the other hand, daring to allow these homeless vagabonds to remain on site, if not hospitably welcoming them to abide in their midst. The Israelites gave them protection, safe shelter from other cultures, securely harboring those who had become homeless refugees under Israel’s emerging and evolving nationalistic wings. This respect, even hospitable practice, was juxtaposed against the often perceived need to have these interlopers either removed or annihilated, total destruction and devastation, whichever convenient or inconvenient solution they believed their seemingly fickle God was advocating, commanding, in the moment. Oh, how the whimsical polarity of blessings describing both a loving and destroying God seemed to ebb and flow. But against the upheavals perpetrated against them, no enemy came close to matching Israelite disgust more than the despised, the absolutely hated, Assyrians, the outpost of Ninevah the great city, the centerpiece of what was considered a most disgustingly repulsive enclave, perhaps even eclipsing, far surpassing the wickedness, the essence of evil, that characterized and evidently constituted the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nothing could be worse for the Israelite faithful than the irony of being ordered to confront the Ninevites, the Assyrian people, an unreasonable request indeed, as they read for the first time the prophetic mythological story of Jonah, what John Dominic Crossan describes as a Hebrew parable. **The prophetic message contained in Jonah, portraying a radical, a brief but poignant, story was a lot to swallow, pun intended!****

The book of Jonah is a short story indeed, a quick and exciting tale that has always been a favorite go to as a quintessential Bible story for children. Yes, Jonah being swallowed by the giant fish, no whale in sight in this story, a captivating image that surely

mesmerizes the wildest imagination in the minds of a most curious child. For literalists, oh, never mind! The plotline is straightforward, easy enough to follow, following patterns that would have been familiar to the ancient reader, this tall tale no doubt originally told according to the poetically dramatic embellishments passed down through oral tradition as it was craftily woven by a gifted storyteller long before the discovery of writing became a welcomed medium. **Jonah is told to go and preach a word of repentance to the Ninevites, an odd, a really strange request, most bizarre, considering the fact that the Ninevites were not Israelite and so it thus would not have seemed to matter. Yes, Ninevites were the epitome of aliens, foreigners, strangers, pagans all! As long as they chose to stay in their place, out of sight and hopefully out of mind, all would be well! Who cared what they did, what their behavior was? Why would this have mattered? Let them mind their own business while we mind ours and everyone will sort of, kind of, get along, détente the best relationship that would ever happen. Low expectations! It is important to remember at this point point that the goal for these Assyrians was repentance from sin, that they change their evil ways, not that they convert, that they become Hebrew or Israelite, the term Jew and Jewish nowhere yet on the collective conscience of the monotheistic followers of Yahweh. It is common knowledge that conversion has not only not been a priority, but has never even been on the Jewish radar! God simply wanted this people, of all people, to behave, to quit their misbehaving. Simple enough. Okay Jonah, you have your instructions, you have your marching orders. Now get to it! Time to put on your big boy preacher pants! Put on your best “sermonator” hat and off you go! Ta ta! Get to work!** Well, to use an ESPN College Game Day image from Lee Corso that I have used on occasion, “Not so fast, my friends! Not so fast!” Jonah basically scoffed at this inane, insane, idea and gave God a clear and decisive “Hell no! I ain’t going and I ain’t going to do that! No way! No how! Not today! Not tomorrow! Not next week! Not next month! Not next year! Not ever!” Or as we like to say in the south, “not never”, a lovely double negative! A little slang goes a long way to make a point! I love how spellchecker hates the word “ain’t!” Surely, Jonah thought that God had lost God’s mind, was suffering from some kind of amnesia, forgetting all that the Assyrians had done to the Israelites, yes, all the misery inflicted on the chosen people of God, God’s select few. Surely, God had totally lost it, lost touch with reality, surely having a bad case of temporary if not permanent insanity. Jonah to the rescue, of God, not Ninevites, the people God swore would be destroyed, obliterated from the face of the earth, if they did not show remorse, repent and get right with the God who was not their God? One could only hope they rejected this divine offer! So no, I won’t go! End of discussion. Well, as we know about God and the pervasive Spirit, the Holy One can be rather persuasive, and

God was not moved by Jonah's stubborn recalcitrance. In this war of wills, we know who will win the standoff! And our story is off and running!

**So, in a hyper bit of avoidance, deflect, deny, defer, Jonah comes up with what had to be absolutely the most brilliant, grandest idea, the reticent prophet deciding that he would run from God, yes, hightail it away from the Holy, and make his great escape, maybe buying a ticket to paradise, avoiding not only God's potential wrath, but he would bypass this dreadful and dreaded assignment, outfoxing, outsmarting, the Holy One at the same time. Yes, Jonah would take evasive action! Jonah, how is this going to work out for you? Jonah, how did this work out for you? So, Jonah flees from the presence of the Lord, or at least so he thought, so he hoped. Yes, catch me if you can! To this day I can hear the words of the revivalist preacher who came to my home church during my youth, boldly declaring, with emphasis, when you choose to run from God, when you try to flee from the presence of the Holy, you always go down, down, down. Can I get an "Amen!" The creative writer of this narrative tells the reader that Jonah went down to Joppa and from there it was all downhill! As we know, Jonah was ejected from the ship by his host sailors during a great storm credited to God, tossed like an anchor, the men on board discovering through the casting of lots that it was Jonah who had brought this calamity upon them and so they tossed him overboard. Yes, down in the drink he went! Tossed to and fro in the waves, Jonah is saved, swallowed by the big fish—talk about a fish tale—going down into the belly of the beast, where he dwelt in the digestive juices for three long days. Puked up onto the dry land, God spoke unto his reluctant spokesperson once again, this time getting a satisfactory but most unhappy response. Jonah obediently goes to the large city of Ninevah and preaches what surely was a most convincing sermon. The king threw off his robe and covered himself with sackcloth and sat among the ashes, leading the people, rather ordering the people, to turn from their evil ways per God's prophet, which they willingly did. The writer tells us that God repented, God changed God's mind, a very different outcome from what we read about in the unrelenting mass destruction of the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And the story ends with Jonah pouting, angry at God for sparing the lives of these reprobates and for loving a people Jonah perceived to be very unworthy, no doubt inferior. God rebukes the sulking Jonah as the preacher/prophet sits under the shade of a bush that God graciously and mercifully provided him and then quickly removed to make the salient point, great object lesson, point being that God's love was not limited to Jonah nor about Jonah or about any one people group. And right there the story abruptly ends, no doubt perplexing anyone who read this short story, perhaps creating an**

**unresolved, unacknowledged, resistant response, a most angry reaction, these Yahweh loyalists no doubt more than surprised, shocked, that God gave a damn about people of this ilk, that God even remotely cared for their wellbeing. While the hatred these nations had for one another is for the most part now lost on contemporary readers, this shocking, disturbing, more than unsettling, turn of events would have not at all been lost on the original readers, anyone who read these horrific exploits unhappily resonating with every word. Surely those first readers were empathetic, sympathetic in every way about Jonah's predicament, his crisis of conscience, the complex conundrum he faced, a dilemma not easy to rationalize in his made-up mind, a plight unimaginable in every way possible.**

Usually, when the story of Jonah is preached and taught there are two major lessons made about this sobering text. The first is that being obedient to God is important, nay essential. True, very true! The second is that somehow this is an evangelism text, that this narrative at its core is an evangelistic call, an evangelical cry to the faithful. How absurd! Aside from the fact that the Hebrew turned Israelite turned Jewish religion has never had at its core or otherwise been conversion based, these two emphases are but occasions in the storyline, not the issue. The issue at stake in the book of Jonah is the writer's confronting an irrational xenophobia, fear of said aliens, foreigners, strangers, the "other" in the midst, the danger of circling the wagons of tribe and clan. There is a clear intentionality of the writer choosing the Assyrians, the citizens of Ninevah, to be the recipient of God's goodness and grace, limited as it often appears to be in the Hebrew Bible, far more than nuance.

Many weeks we choose in worship to read a lection from the Hebrew Bible rather than from the epistles and many of these ancient texts remind us that this narrative history is framed against the backdrop of the ongoing conflicts that dominated the day back in the day. Historians, including one of my two major professors, an Old Testament scholar extraordinaire, constantly reminds his readers and students that the story of the Exodus from Egypt through the wilderness and into the land of Promised, yes, the proverbial Promised Land, cannot be taken as literal fact, as historically accurate. Yes, we can hear that! At the same time, if we buy any of what the writers of Torah were selling, the Pentateuch is full of stories that describe the excruciatingly painful challenges, including the graphic depictions describing the seizing of territory, the violent takeover of a land originally called the Land of Canaan, turning the city of Jebus into Zion, the city of God called Jerusalem. It was so called for obvious reasons, this fertile land flowing with milk and honey originally belonging to the Canaanites as well as being occupied by numerous

other tribes and clans. This presumably blessed manifest destiny, an ancient version of imminent domain, search and seizure, always creates crisis and conflict, a warring landscape revealing winners and losers, including ultimate conquest, the victors in this social media absent time always getting the spoils and the story. We see all the damage and destruction, the horrors, unleashed in Russia's vicious unmerited, unwarranted, attack on a sovereign nation, Ukraine, a demonic invasion, occupation, and conquest. As the folk song sings, "When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?" These kinds of conflagrations are always a recipe for disaster. What apparently was true during the formative years of the nation of Israel continues to unfold in the current conflicts including outright distrust and unfortunately, even obvious hatred between Israelis and Palestinians, the toxicity involving other countries in the region. Yes, some of these adversarial nations and its peoples would rejoice in, relishing in, the end of Israel, celebrating its demise, refusing to acknowledge its right to exist. And of course, suspending the evil of Hamas for a moment, Israel is not without soiled hands, their response, including an officially unofficial apartheid state, has exacerbated the Palestinian plight, their cause just, their need for a homeland as a Palestinian State a vital necessity, what should be a required expectation as the ultimate, and perhaps only, lasting solution. I must confess that every time I discuss this volatile subject I do so with absolute dread, with fear and trembling, knowing how easy it is to say the wrong thing about a subject that elicits passions on all sides. Yes, I agonize with each word, but to say nothing would be a dereliction of duty, an avoidance I cannot in good conscience choose. So, I take the risk, hoping for much grace and understanding!

Not only is the land-called-holy rife with divisiveness, the routine order of these agonizing days, but in our own country we are facing our own contemporary crisis of relationship as well. Yes, what is transparently true in other places can also clearly be said about us, our situation continuing to devolve as tribalism run amuck dominates the landscape in the home of the free and the brave, an ever-present threat to democracy and the desire for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a society supposedly built on a hill as a light shining, some would say "of", but definitely to and among the nations. The words of Jonah then are as relevant now, timeless, as fresh to our contemporary ears today as they were the day that they were first uttered and eventually first penned for perpetuity. The word to Israelites then and Israelites now, to Russians and Ukrainians, as innocent as they are in this "special military operation," to Americans one and all, and to every person on this ever-shrinking planet, this fragile global village, is that we have to find a new narrative for our world, chart a new course, define a new pathway forward as we strive to find ways to get along, to live together in harmony, to

coexist, thriving side-by-side, respecting human diversity in all its myriad, multi-faceted, “rainbowesque” expressions, each one beautiful in its own right, in its own way. All the peoples of the earth are complicit in our current dis-ease, our communal angst, all of us to some degree, all of us to blame at some level for the demise of local and global civility, all of us owning a part in a drama that more often than not reflects our warring madness. We cling to tribe and clan with every ounce of our being as if it determines our last breath. And sadly, in these, our, presumably United States, it is Christianity, yes, the Christian faith, the faith passed down from the martyrs, Church Fathers and Mothers, that has ironically become the flagship, a petri dish, a greenhouse, setting the standard for division and schismatic behavior, Christian nationalism, an oxymoron if ever there was one, now conveniently and hatefully serving as the face of, further galvanizing, blatant racism, sexism, and irrational xenophobic fears. Our immigration system is a toxic, systemic, mess and we cannot seem to find a compassionate and firm solution. Our government must learn to walk and chew gum around this issue! With all that being said and acknowledged, as Conference Minister Franz Riegert reminds us followers of Jesus, “The politics of immigration are complicated and contentious, yet the scriptures speak clearly about ‘extending hospitality to strangers’ (Romans 12:13) and offering rightful treatment and care ‘to resident aliens’ (Exodus 22:21). Jesus was unequivocal in his advocacy for the poor and oppressed, saying, ‘Whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me’” (Matthew 25:40).

**The unspoken word implied within, emanating from, the book of Jonah reflects a principle first articulated in the Shema Israel (Deuteronomy 6:4) and expanded throughout the biblical narrative and that is that God values every human being, that God’s gracious love is extended to every human creation, all of whom reflect the divine image, stamped as an imprimatur of holiness, a constant reminder of our place in the created order. Yes, God loves Ninevites! God loves Israelites! God loves Palestinians! God loves Russians, Ukrainians and America! Pick a nation, name it, and God loves its inhabitants. God loves you and me! All of us are them, yes, the other and all at the same time! God’s clarion call to Jonah was a hard word, a tough word, a difficult word, for the mythical prophetic figure to hear. It was a nearly impossible read to swallow for those who first read this amazing parable, including the likes of everyone since, who have read and continue to read this surprising, if not shocking, tale. Yes, the message would have been explicit! Why is the strangely subtle but overarching message so hard to get, so difficult to understand? What part of everyone do we not get? Our worldly behavior belies the claims we make! The message of Jesus, clearly articulated in case anyone within earshot failed to get it, to understand**

it fully, was, that because God first loved us, that we, therefore, are to always love God, and loving God always includes, yes, demands, love of neighbor, and love of self. This command is basic, foundational, religion 101! Yes, these words for such a time as this must become the chorus echoed throughout humanity, resonating throughout the world. This message is at the core, the very centerpiece of our calling, our hope for the Church and for the world, a prophetic witness, a profound testimony, that must be shouted from the rooftops, shared in every medium and venue within our domain, under our control. It is our only hope! It is our only salvation! Yes, we face a complicated challenge, negotiating an intricate landscape full of landmines. How do we proclaim our witness, declaring self, individually and collectively, respecting the opinions and the personhood of all others, while claiming our space, telling our truth, truth as we perceive it, sharing the gospel as we know it as followers of Jesus? How do we do both? Where is the line, a line that is always moving, subtle and not? When do we call out those whose beliefs, whose viewpoints, are harmful, even hateful, contrary to God's lovingly gracious hospitality, the warmth of welcome and inclusion? No, it is not easy! It is never easy! It was never meant to be easy! Opinions matter! Words matter! Our voices, all rational voices, are necessary, all hands on deck. They must be heard, echoing against the cacophony of the noisy gongs and clanging symbols that reverberate around the world, all the chatter and clatter diminishing our humanity, destroying the best efforts, our hopes and dreams, our prayers for a global village, peace on earth in every little corner. May we continue to do our part from our little slice of heaven, our little corner of the world known as Eagle River, Wisconsin. May this be our hope and prayer. May we truly learn from the sapient wisdom of old, its poetic words made new within us, renewing and enlivening all of us until we truly become one, the ultimate hope springing from Jesus' teaching and preaching, his mission and ministry.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and will never give up hope for the apple of God's eye, the very image of God's creation, yes, every human being inhabiting this sphere of a tiniest spaceship! Amen and amen!