

Circle of Mercy Sermon
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“Defining Moments”
Text: Jonah

This week the Jewish community will observe Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the day of prayer and fasting, repentance and forgiveness. It is considered the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Included in the readings is always the story of Jonah.

Jonah was the reluctant prophet, the anti-hero. Like all of God’s calls, he was summoned without an assurance of his effectiveness. His assignment seemed ludicrous. He ran away, but not quite far enough.

It was a defining moment. God asked Jonah to go to Ninevah to warn the people that their city would be destroyed in 40 days unless they repented from all their evil ways.

What could be better than to get God’s command to go cry out against the capital city of the evil empire of Assyria? Those people were ruthless, brutal. They plundered the earth and its people, including Jonah’s people of Israel. We’ll go!

Jonah didn’t think it was a good idea. He booked a ticket to ride on a ship to Tarshish, the opposite direction from God’s call.

Why was he reluctant? Why would God care to save Ninevah? Their destruction was in the best interests of national security. They weren’t changing. It was a waste of time. Plus he was conflicted over how to be true to his faith, and his own people and their suffering and still confront the enemy.

It was a defining moment for Jonah. He was convinced. Never Ninevah.

Most of us have never been on the receiving end of drone strikes, or other forms of warfare. Hopefully we never will know such horror. William Sloane Coffin said, “Love your enemies, but love them as

enemies. Let's not be sentimental about this thing." Jonah knew the enemy. He knew their immense power for destruction. He held tight to that ticket to Tarshish.

There are times we book a seat on the same boat. Never Ninevah. We know that exasperating feeling of futility, a sense of powerlessness in the face of unchangeable people or situations or institutions or national leadership or wars.

Never Ninevah. This is not to be taken lightly. We know the despair. Our President daily commits fire-able offenses for any job any of us have ever held. If he was a prisoner in this state, his taunting and offensive language would land him in solitary confinement with the charge of "disrespect" and "inciting a riot." Seems like "inciting hatreds, divisions and wars" would be enough to stop him.

"Never Ninevah" is never quite knowing what to do. "Never Ninevah" is never feeling we can make any difference. But regrettably, "Never Ninevah" is never escape from life's storms.

While Jonah was on the seas, a storm blew up. The sailors tried valiantly to keep the ship from sinking. They did everything. They started praying. Jonah tried to reassure them that he was a person of religious conviction. "I'm a Hebrew. I worship God who made the sea and land."

Uh-oh. The sailors were desperate to get through to him, to get through his denial of his having anything to do with it. So they said something like, "Jonah, no matter what your religion or race or nationality or what kind of first class ticket you have, we're all sinking here."

Jonah confessed his part in the disaster. He was thrown overboard. It was a defining moment. Neither his religion or his privilege or his perspective could save him.

A great fish caught him. With three days and three nights in the belly of doom, Jonah prayed. "Out of the depths, I cry to you, O God." Save me, God. He was swallowed up in the darkness of despair...a place where questions have no answers, where privilege grants no security, where plans have no future, where force has no power.

Who are you now, Jonah? Was he in the watery hold of the grave or the womb? When you're in such a place you simply don't know.

Jonah was spit out onto dry land. God offered Jonah the divine gift of rebirth with the words, "Arise. Go to Ninevah." Grace and challenge, forgiveness and responsibility were offered with one sweep of the hand. It was another defining moment: a second chance. Wonder if God thought that Jonah's gratitude for his second chance would open his heart for Ninevah having a second chance?

He walked from one end of the city to the other, preaching, "Turn around. Repent or in 40 days Ninevah will be overthrown." Could he see children playing, cattle grazing, families eating, parents singing lullabies? Could it soften his heart, or could he only see them through the barrel of his own pain and longing for vengeance?

Lo and behold, the Ninevites listened to the warning. They repented. It was a prophet's dream come true. The king led the people in putting down their weapons and singing, "Let there be peace on earth."

Jonah should've been thrilled, but he was mad. He went to the edge of the city to pout. Even in his doubts and pouts, Jonah stayed in conversation with God. It is a sign of faithfulness.

Jonah said, "I knew it. You see why I never wanted to take this job, God? I knew about you being gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. I knew it. There's nothing for me to do now. Just take my life."

God said, "Are you saying that you'd rather die than see your enemies spared? Do you need to go back in *time out* in the belly of that fish? Do you need to remember the times you've been acting just like the enemies you hate? Do you need to remember how consumed you've been with your rage? And how much you depend on your enemies to define you, shape your every action, your every response, your every anger, your hardened heart? Is it right for you to be angry?"

Yep, Jonah thought. Sure. Seems right. Right enough to keep fueling this fight.

You know that the present day city of Ninevah is on the banks of the Tigris River and known as Mosul, Iraq.

Mosul is a city that has known relentless fighting and killings for years. A couple years ago, ISIS destroyed the burial site that was designated as Jonah's tomb. Enemy forces showed no mercy for the burial site of the prophet who resented mercy given for the enemy.

Mercy doesn't seem to be a dominant trait that is passed from one generation to the next. Seems like a treasure buried in tombs. Does each generation have to find the treasure once again?

Jonah sat looking out over the city to see what would happen. God sent a bush to shade him. He was glad. But then a worm ate the bush. The bush died. And Jonah wanted to die along with it.

The story ends with the sun beating down on Jonah's head, and God saying, "Jonah, what about that bush? You had nothing to do with it. And what about Ninevah? Why shouldn't I care about them? There are 120,000 people there who don't even know their right hand from their left hand. And also much cattle."

It is another defining moment, defined by God's surprise of mercy. Never say never.

Jesus' follower asked about defining moments. They wanted to know if there'd be a sign that defined the moment when God's reign would come. Jesus said there'd be no sign except the sign of Jonah.

As a people of faith, we are in defining moments of our lives in a time of crisis. We are in defining moments in our nation. We don't know our right hand from our left hand. Who are we? Who are we becoming?

On the one hand we are the people who are helping to restore the ruined lives and land from hurricanes and earthquakes. We are the people who have welcomed immigrants and refugees. We are the people of second chances.

On the other hand we are the people bearing hatred and desiring punishment against our enemies. We are the people who have a history of slavery, lynchings, beatings, and bombs. We are the people of no chances.

We don't know our right hand from our left hand. Jonah wasn't too clear about his either. The story ends with his silence. He still sitting there? What does he hear now? Can he hear what God's heard all along?

In the aftermath of the earthquake in Mexico this week, there were thousands doing all they could to help save people. Signs were held up that read "*Silencio.*" Silence. People were asked to be silent in order to hear the cries of those still trapped in the ruins.

Silencio. Who's trapped? Can we hear their cries? Maybe God's mercy for Ninevah had nothing to do with the cruelty that needed to be stopped, and everything to do with the mercy that needed to be extended...especially to those trapped in the ruins of disaster. There is no such thing as targeted vengeance. War exacts its wounds on everyone. Mercy is needed.

Maybe this puzzling story says to us: Don't give up. We are given the God-like power to act within the mystery of divine compassion. God is still listening and still hearing our cries. God is still offering second chances. God is still interrupting our cycles of violence with mercy, that entry point for new possibilities. God is still inviting us to participate in this holy work.

Come on, Jonah. How about Ninevah? Come join us. God is still here. God is present with us. We begin again. Look. 120,000 people were delivered and also much cattle.

Baruch atah Adonai begins the Jewish prayer....

Blessed are you, O God, Creator of the universe, who sustains the entire world with goodness, kindness and mercy.