

NUDGINGS
Randall Tremba
January 25, 2015
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

* * *

Once upon a time the LORD said to Jonah, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and tell those people, whom you hate, to change their ways so I won't destroy them."

By the way, some people still picture God that way literally: perched on a throne in a remote region of the heavens with a remote control displaying two buttons. One says, *BLESS*; the other says, *SMITE*.

Jonah loved his country and hated his country's enemies. He loved his own people but nobody else. Jonah was the poster child for xenophobia.

God said, "Go to Nineveh."

Jonah said, "No. Those people deserve to be smitten. They are evil. They cannot and will not change."

And off he ran in the opposite direction and jumped on a ship heading west toward Tarshish. So God pressed the *smite* button—or so Jonah thought—and a ferocious storm smote the ship.

"God is trying to kill me," he said. So he jumped over board.

A large fish swallowed him and after three days stewing in the belly of the fish, the fish was so disgusted with Jonah's wretched attitude, he retched him up like a cat spitting up a hairball.

Jonah figured there was no escaping God, just like there's no escaping the nudgings of compassion in our own heart. So Jonah went to Nineveh and reluctantly proclaimed, "Change your ways and you'll be saved."

The word spread. The entire population repented overnight, which is another clue this is not a factual story in case you missed the "big fish" clue. The city was saved. All lives spared.

That's not quit the end of the tale, but I'll stop there for now.

* * *

This past September, Karis and Joshua Nolen named their firstborn child Jonah, the same name Paula and I gave our firstborn 37 years ago this month.

I don't know how Joshua and Karis's parents felt about that name but I can tell you how my mother felt. She was shocked and dismayed. You might say even a little horrified!

"How could you," she said. "How could you name your son after one of the worst characters in the Bible, a man who turned his back on God? You might as well have named him *Judas*."

Now, mom, I said, relax. We didn't name him after the character. We named him after the *message* in the book by that name, which is a message, or dream of universal love and peace. It's not historical. It didn't happen the way you think. It's a story, a kind of cartoon, a whale of a fish tale. In fact, the name *Jonah*, I told her, means *dove*, a symbol of peace. The Old Testament book by that name is really a prayer for universal peace!

My mother, a devout fundamentalist, looked at me with a skeptical eye. *Where did you get that from?*

I got it, I said, from the education you insisted I get. I've learned that you can't take the Bible literally *if you take it seriously*. Parts of it are myths and folktales. That's just the way it is, mom.

My mother stared at me trying to get her mind around my outrageous claims about the Bible she considered *The Word of God*.

Then she asked me, "Do you believe Jesus existed?"

Yes, I do, I said.

And that seemed to console her.

My mother had only an 8th grade education. She had an innate curiosity and a love of learning. But she wasn't gullible. She had to be convinced.

Jonah was not convinced that God loved bad people, nor that he himself should love them either, just as we're not convinced we should love bad people like the Boston bomber, or rapists, or terrorists. By the way, love doesn't mean condoning bad behavior. It doesn't mean letting others walk over us or those we love. It means treating others as we would be treated. Humanely. Honestly.

We can easily say, *I am Charlie Hebdo*; but we can't so easily say, *I am ISIS*. *I am a terrorist*.

It seems we quickly identify with victims of hate, but not with those who hate and hurt others. But who are we fooling?

Who among us hasn't inflicted harm on others out of resentment or revenge for unfair or cruel treatment or some cartoonish insult to our dignity? No, we don't use AK 47s or IEDs, but we're armed to the teeth with deadly words.

There's more than one way to wound somebody.

Jonah was as self-righteous and smug as they come. He loved his country right or wrong. But something in his heart—attributed in the story to "the voice of God"—nudged him to look at his nation's enemies differently.

"Go to Nineveh," said the Lord, "and take a look at people you've never seen." Which, by the way, could be said to us: *look at the people you see all time, but never notice*.

Go to Nineveh and take a look.

Well, I haven't gone to Nineveh or anywhere else in the Middle East, but I've tried to understand our nation's enemies, to stand in their place. I've asked myself hard questions.

Is it possible they feel the same indiscriminate hatred against America that so many of us felt against Muslims following 911?

Is it possible they are avenging terror attacks against them, the murder of children we blithely call collateral damage?

Could they be avenging humiliation forced on them by Western powers, specifically our support of brutal dictators who allow the expropriation of their national resources like oil, keeping their own people in poverty?

Could they be angry over assassinations of their own elected leaders by agents of our government, or angry over US military bases on their soil? How would we feel if, say, Iran had 20 or so military bases in the United States?

These may strike us as outrageous questions and possibilities. But if we're willing to learn, willing to question what we've been led to believe, we can learn a lot about America's misdeeds in the Middle East.

Our hands and motives are not nearly as clean as most of us were led to believe; nor as dirty as some would have us believe. Childish thinking is OK for children but not for adults.

"Go to Nineveh," said the Lord, "and take a look at people you've never really seen."

And so I ask myself: Could it be they don't hate us for our freedoms, as a certain president claimed? Could it be they hate us for old and deep injustices, real or perceived—just as we react with anger when we are treated unjustly?

Anger, by the way, is a healthy human response to real or perceived injustice. What we do next depends on what we are cultivating in our heart.

Jonah was angry. He sat outside the city in the hot sun under the shade of a vine waiting for God to pulverize his nation's enemy, you know those Japs, Krauts, Chinks, Gooks, and terrorists who are less than human, part of a dehumanized category.

Jonah waited outside the city under the shade of a cool vine to see those evil people get their just desserts.

But, according to the story, God had a change of mind. Calamity did not befall the city. The people were spared.

And Jonah was angry.

"Good Lord! Is not this what I said would happen? That is why I fled to Tarshish because I know you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, take my life, for it is better for me to die than to live" — which is to say, I'd rather be dead than live in a world where good and evil are not clearly defined, where evil people cannot be bombed with a clear conscience and with no questions asked!

Then the heat of the day withered the vine under which Jonah sat and he was angry yet again. God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because you are uncomfortable?"

"Yes it is," said Jonah, "angry enough to die."

Then the Lord said, "And should I then not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

And that's how this tale ends. It ends with a question? And that's our question too. In the end it's not about whether Nineveh will change but whether Jonah will change? Will

we have a change of heart about those we disregard as less than human, less than beloved of God?

Should I not be concerned about Nineveh in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people and also many animals?

And many animals? Really?? That's how you're ending this tale? With many animals!

Which is, I think, to say: don't overlook or disregard any, children and animals included. Killing the least is hardly collateral damage in God's eyes.

But how will we ever learn that?

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today.

Follow me, said Jesus to four xenophobic fishermen who lived under the terror of the Roman Empire, which had just publicly beheaded a publisher of subversive news named John the Baptist. Follow me, said Jesus, and I will show you a new way of connecting with people in your world, right now, right here.

You know, it's possible to proudly love our nation's geopolitical enemies on the other side of the world and totally disregard irksome people at home. The kingdom, or empire, of God is at hand, said Jesus. Not elsewhere. Right here.

You don't have to go to Nineveh or the Middle East or anywhere else in the world. You can get outside your comfort zone and connect with others right here, right now.

We might not hear a voice but we may feel—right in the thick and tangle of our lives—a nudging to connect with others we've long blithely disregarded, looked past or down upon.

I don't know how these nudgings come. All I know is that they come. They come as a moment of grace, an invitation. I'm guessing you're feeling one right now or may in the next few moments of silence.

* * *

Hymn

Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore