

Lenten Devotional February 22, 2023 – Ash Wednesday

Scripture

Jonah 3:1-4:11

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. 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!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

10 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. 2 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. 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The LORD God appointed a bush and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort, so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” 10 Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And 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?”

Devotional

The Rev. Dr. Steve Tuell, Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament

Mostly, what folks know about Jonah is that he was swallowed by a fish. Our text today begins *after* that fish story, when Jonah set out a second time (his attempt to flee from God's call had put him in the fish's belly in the first place) to deliver God's message of destruction to wicked Nineveh (3:4). But when the people of Nineveh repented, "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it" (3:10). Jonah was furious—but not at all surprised. This, he said, is why he had fled earlier: "I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment" (4:2).

Jonah is (mis)quoting the Divine self-declaration in Exodus 34:6-7, which describes God as *wenaqqeh lo' yinaqqeh* ("by no means clearing the guilty"). Instead, he punningly describes God as *wenikham 'al-hara'ah* ("relenting from punishment"): sparing undeserving Nineveh, in conflict with God's own word. Jonah—rightly—accuses God of inconstancy. As Abraham Heschel observed, "God's answer to Jonah, stressing the supremacy of compassion, upsets the possibility of looking for a rational coherence of God's ways with the world."

On Ash Wednesday, as we reflect on ourselves as made from and returning to dust (Gen 2:7; 3:19), we may ask, with Jonah: shouldn't life, shouldn't God, be *fair*? But Scripture says no—that instead, God is gracious and compassionate. This offends our sense of fairness—until we are the ones in need of grace and compassion. Friends, as people made in God's image (Gen 1:26-27), may we extend to others the grace and compassion God has undeservedly lavished on us.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for showering your grace and compassion upon us. Teach us through these forty days to be ourselves gracious and compassionate—to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our crucified Lord. Amen.