

Bigots For the Lord?

September 24, 2023

The Set Up

Our scripture texts today are both morality tales about human nature and how very different it is from God's ways. The passage that Kathy read for us from the Book of Jonah is the end of that book. Many of us know the broadest brushstrokes about that book. God told Jonah to prophesy to the people of Nineveh. Jonah doesn't want to, so he runs in the opposite direction. In fact, in order to run away from God, Jonah gets a ticket to board a boat. But, as we all know, there's nowhere you can go to get away from God.

To show this, God then hurls a great wind onto the sea, creating a massive storm. The sailors figure out it is Jonah that has inspired God to whip up the storm, so they throw him overboard. The storm ceases, and God provides a giant fish to swallow Jonah whole. Jonah survives in the belly of the fish for three days, during which time he prays, acknowledging God's greatness.

Then the Lord speaks to the fish and it vomits Jonah onto dry land, where God proceeds to instruct Jonah again to go to Nineveh and bring them a message. This time Jonah does go to the massive city of Nineveh. He speaks God's message, the Ninevites believe it, they repent, and not only does the king make a proclamation that all are to repent from their evil ways, he even says the animals are to be part of this repentance and conversion.

That's where we pick up with the passage Kathy read for us today. The Ninevites repent, God relents, and Jonah is furious.

What It Means For Us

When I was growing up, I heard this as a story of God's power. God can preserve Jonah in the belly of the fish for three days. God can save the Ninevites from destruction. But the point of the story is actually this last chapter. Jonah says, "I knew that you were a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment."

Jonah ran from God because he didn't want the Ninevites to be saved! God sent Jonah with a message to a people of a different race and different religion, and the reason Jonah didn't want to go is because he knew God is gracious, merciful, and loving. He knew God would forgive, and he didn't want the Ninevites to be right with God. Even after his near-death experience in the belly of the fish, an experience that is so magnificent that it should bring him around to God's ways of doing things, Jonah's grudge against the Ninevites is so intense that he begrudges them God's mercy.

Now, before we write Jonah off as a racist or a bigot, it's helpful to know who the Ninevites were. Nineveh was part of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were responsible for the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They had been brutal, destroying cities and wreaking havoc across the ancient near east. Their war crimes rival the worst genocides of the 20th century, and their kings boasted about these atrocities. What the Assyrians had done was stomach-churningly awful, and Jonah didn't want them to get off.

Sound familiar? Jonah isn't a racist and a bigot for racism's sake. He's got reasons. But then, don't most bigots? Those foreigners are rapists and murderers. They're going to take all of our jobs. Those drag queens are going to turn our kids gay.

The book of Jonah is usually categorized as a prophetic book, but I would suggest it is a morality tale about bigotry. The definition of bigotry is an obstinate bias against members of a particular group. That's Jonah.

“C. S. Lewis has a great passage in ‘The Four Loves,’ where he argues that love of country can become idolatrous and thus a vehicle for exploitation and evil. He was writing in the aftermath of World War II, when it was even clearer than today that patriotism can become demonic. Two signs indicate this might be happening in one's life.

One sign is when your race becomes more fundamental to your identity than your faith in God. Jonah knew that if Nineveh repented and received mercy, it might be bad for his nation. So he put his national interests ahead of the Ninevites' need to hear God's truth. That is to make your love for and service to your race and nation more important than your love for and service to God.”

—Timothy Keller, American Calvinist pastor, preacher, and theologian

Lewis adds a second sign.

“He says when you start to whitewash your nation's history, when you won't admit the bad things your nation has done, then you are in danger of beginning to feel so superior to other peoples that you can justify cruelty.”

—Timothy Keller

That summarizes Jonah in a nutshell, and sounds all too familiar today, doesn't it?

Bitterness

It's interesting, that bitterness is what ties together our two scripture readings today. Jonah is bitter that God showed mercy to those evil Ninevites and the workers who worked longer hours who ended up getting paid the same wages were bitter because God was generous.

Friends, bitterness is the fruit of the sin of comparison. Michael Chan teaches Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. He puts it this way:

“The human heart clings to bitterness like a dog to a fleshy bone. It takes root so deeply within us that we would much rather die than forgive, cling to pride than embrace mercy.”

But, of course, the lesson isn't bitterness. Our takeaway is that we are supposed to try to conform ourselves to God's nature, God's ways of mercy and generosity and love.

To this, Chan goes on:

“One thing is clear: the Ninevites are not the only ones pursued by Yahweh’s mercy. God stays with Jonah, the bitter and unforgiving prophet, extending mercy to the merciless and compassion to the one whose heart is set on wrath.”

Conclusion

The point of our Gospel today is that God’s generosity isn’t going to follow our narrow human expectations. It’s so much grander than that. The point of the Book of Jonah isn’t the repentance of the Ninevites, it’s that God is going to keep pursuing Jonah the bigot.

It’s easy to spew venom at the venomous, to fight fire with fire. But our faith isn’t about doing what is easy or even logical. It’s about conforming ourselves to God’s ways, to be “merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

This summer, when Pat Robertson died, I saw a lot of folks writing that they hoped that he got what he deserved, that they hoped the hate and bigotry he spewed for decades would be what stood in judgment of him. But as a student of the two passages of scripture that we read today, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, I prefer the vision of his eternal reward as is portrayed in the poem “Ruminations On the Death of Pat Robertson,” by KC:

I don’t like to think about Pat Robertson going to hell.
That lets him off too easy.
I like to think about Pat Robertson finding himself
in a heaven he never believed would exist.

Where Divine is reading in drag
to the children murdered at
Sandy Hook and Ulvalde.
While Edie Windsor
and Gertrude Stein drink coffee
in the breakfast nook,
talking politics with Harvey Milk.
Where Matthew Shepard relaxes by
a stream, reading poetry to
a nameless young man whose family
never claimed his body when he died of AIDS.

Where the music plays loudly,
welcoming dancers from the Pulse
and Club Q to the floor where they
twirl and vogue with
all the murdered trans women of color
whose names we never knew.

Where Jesus puts his arm around
Pat Robertson’s shoulders,
drapes them with a rainbow feather boa,
and, gesturing around him says,
“Come, meet my disciples.”

Friends, our homework is simple: to be more like God and less like Jonah and Pat Robertson. But bitterness and bigotry are tempting. We've got work to do.

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