

Whatdyaknow?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Jonah 3:1-10

Jonah is my kind of prophet. Reluctant, withdrawn, moody, stubborn, and not quite ready to leave the comfort of his hometown.

And that's a problem. Because all over the Hebrew Bible, when God speaks... people are supposed to get up and go. Abraham and Sarah move out on a promise and a prayer. Moses heads for Egypt with nothing but a shepherd's staff. Elijah travels far outside his comfort zone and winds up trusting a foreign widow.

But no, not Jonah! When God says "Go!" Jonah stands on the dock with a ticket to travel in the opposite direction.

He wanted to get as far away as possible from Ninevah, where God told him to go.

Nineveh, the Assyrian capitol, represented the enemy at its most powerful and wicked. In the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., it was the Assyrians who led a Holocaust against the Jews of sorts, nearly wiping Jonah's people out of existence, plundering and looting and burning their cities. There was some BAD history there.

Anne Lamott famously said *"You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."* It's true that we all have our enemies. For Jonah, it's Ninevites.

Who is it for you?

Jonah was a man of gentle prejudice, not actively discriminating against those Ninevites, just not thrilled at being sent by God to redeem them.

But God was persistent and asked Jonah a second time, so off he goes, reluctantly dragging his feet the entire way. When he arrives in the middle of the city, he gives what might be the most passive call to transformation anyone has ever heard.

All the while, he is half-hoping that no one will listen, so his God can finally level the city with his mighty wrath.

Somewhat unpredictably, the entire city of 120,000 people, including the king and curiously, many animals, believe him and repent! They declare a fast, put ashes on their faces, discard their fancy designer clothes for simple burlap, and start caring for the poor, the widows and the orphans.

Upon seeing their sincere change of heart and ways, God forgave.

Well, whatdyaknow? Even the people that Jonah thought were irredeemable could actually change their ways! And instead of a big, explosive, violent reckoning, God can choose to relent. There can be peace and harmony and forgiveness instead of apocalyptic fire raining from the heavens upon their heads.

Predictably... this made Jonah absolutely furious!

He thought that God's gift of grace was given to those wicked Ninevites way too easily. So Jonah told God off, and then went out and sat on a hill outside the city so he could watch and see if anything bad might still happen to them, as he so desperately wished it would!

We know we are called to go and love our brothers and sisters, but then we turn on a TV, or scroll through our Facebook feed, and we see in each other anything but a family resemblance!

Instead we see rednecks, snowflakes, elitists, idiots ... people who have it coming—Ninevites!!!

And I know, this grace and forgiveness thing can be super hard to do in a regular week, not to mention right now! And yet... Jesus blessed the peacemakers, and called his followers to be salt and light in a dark and divided world. He gave them an identity, saying, "*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*"

And he taught that the greatest commandment is to love God and others as oneself.

Jonah believed the Ninevites deserved whatever problems came their way. He didn't know what to do with his own anxiety, repulsion and fear. Those Ninevites were "the other", entirely undeserving of God's love.

In the gospels, the Pharisees often felt the same way about people:

- When they noticed Zacchaeus in that tree, all they saw was a tax collector;
- And when the paralyzed man was lowered through the roof, they just saw someone getting in the way;
- And when they witnessed the Samaritan woman at the well, they just saw an outcast;
- And when they observed the thief on the cross, well, he was just saw another sinner getting what he deserved.

But when Jesus looked upon the same people with justice and mercy colored glasses, he described them quite differently:

- Zaccheus became the brother who had finally come home;
- The man lowered through the roof became a friend who now has a future;
- The woman at the well became a sister pulled into the heart of community;
- And the thief became a loved one who was forgiven and welcomed into paradise.

My prayer for us, in this liminal time, is that we have the courage, strength, determination and wisdom to love our neighbors and our enemies as Christ has first loved us. And I pray that God grants us all the grace to affirm the image of God in every person.

Because grace is like glitter: it gets everywhere, there is always more of it, and it always shows up where you are not expecting it.

And may we find empathy for our friends and family that we disagree with. May we have the ears to hear what lies at the heart of their concerns, and the eyes to see their perspective, especially when we are deeply divided.

Let's not be like Jonah, waiting for the hammer to come down upon the people we don't like, and troubled and angry when it doesn't.

Those who are led by the Spirit of God must learn to bring together a deeply divided community and contribute towards its healing. May we all join in that work, giving our support to those who will bring peace. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.