



Reminder: *God Loves Those We Hate*
January 24, 2021: The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, to whom the dark and the light are both alike: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Since today is the only Sunday in the three-year Sunday lectionary cycle that we get a passage from the Prophet Jonah, I feel I have my marching orders.

A bit of background is in order to set up this short passage. Though it seems that Jonah may have been an actual figure, the Book of Jonah is clearly a fable set in the early 700s BCE, when the Assyrians, whose capital was Nineveh, did in fact occupy the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The story was probably written in the 400s or 300s BCE, when the Temple had been rebuilt, Jerusalem repopulated, and Israel enjoyed a modicum of freedom under the umbrella of Persia. The inhabitants of Nineveh would have been feared and despised by any Israelite. Jonah is called by God to preach to the Ninevites that they should repent of their evil ways, or that God would destroy them. Apparently, God is worried about Nineveh and wants them to stop doing evil deeds. Whether that includes withdrawal from Israel, the text does not say.

Jonah resists this call and stows away on a ship sailing in the opposite direction. Calamities on board lead the ship's crew to accept Jonah's explanation that he is the source of the trouble. So, in the midst of a terrible storm, they throw him overboard. Jonah is then swallowed by a large fish, where he resides for 3 days before being spit up on the shore, after promising to God that he would do what God wanted him to do.

In our passage today, God issues the command a second time. Jonah sets out to Nineveh, and dutifully preaches the warning. Ninevites obey the warning; they dress in sackcloth and ashes and turn from their evil ways. Consequently, God relents and changes his mind about the calamity that God had planned.

If we read beyond today's excerpt, we would see that Jonah is greatly dismayed by the Ninevites' repentance. Here's a description of his reaction taken from *The Message* translation: "God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!"

Jonah stalks off outside the city to sulk under a makeshift lean-to. God replaces it with a leafy tree to provide shade. Jonah is pleased, until God sends a worm to make the tree wither away, then sends a blistering east wind. Jonah is even more miserable. The last words in the story are God's, again from *The Message* translation. God says, "What's this? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than 120,000 childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong, to say nothing of all the innocent animals?"



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Sometimes I think that we can be like Jonah. We want God to feel the same way we do about people we can't stand, and perhaps for good reason. But that's not how God works. As one commentator I came across bluntly puts it, "Jonah is a story about how God loves the people you hate." (Rolf Jacobson, *Sermon Brainwave* podcast for January 24, 2021)

Jesus is especially good at loving people who those in his time avoided or hated. Yet even those of us that feel like we're pretty good at loving some of the people that Jesus loved in the Gospels—widows, children, the poor, the hungry, the sick—we may have trouble with edgier types, like people whose political and cultural views are different than ours. We may actively or secretly despise them. Sometimes, at best, we can say to ourselves, "Well, good for God—maybe God can love them, but I sure can't!"

Not too long ago, I read a book called *Strangers in their Own Land: A Journey to the Heart of our Political Divide*. Written by Arlie Hochschild, a liberal sociology professor at UC Berkeley, the book is the fruit of five years of visits to Louisiana to learn about people who are politically and socially conservative. Her goal was to scale what she calls "the empathy wall" at the center of the political and cultural divide in our country. What rang especially true to me was her discovery that all of us have what she calls "deep stories." She writes that, "A deep story is a 'feels-as-if-story'—it's the story feelings tell in the language of symbols. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. I don't believe we understand anyone's politics, right or left, without it." And, she goes on to say, "We all have a deep story The deep story represents the hopes, fears, pride, shame, resentment, and anxiety [in our lives.] Acknowledging the deep story that we have allows us to step back to see the subjective prism that informs how all of us order our political lives." (*Strangers*, 135)

I would add that our deep stories affect every aspect of our lives, not just our politics. I can imagine each of us has interactions with people in our families or workplaces which seem to be immune to facts. The deep story, if not acknowledged and honored, will repel any attempt to crudely convince with mere facts. But seeking to understand someone's deep story helps us close the gap between loving as we love, and loving as God loves.

It would have been tough for Jonah to learn and honor the deep story of his occupiers. Perhaps our challenge is just as great. And, it needs to be said, there is no room for acceptance of bigotry and violence as appropriate expressions of anyone's deep stories.

But God's big story of loving creation and loving redemption is big enough to redeem all of our deep stories.

Either God's salvation is universal, or it isn't. Either Jesus' Good News is for everyone, or it isn't. Either God loves all people or God doesn't.

Amen.