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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Epiphany 3, Series B
Saturday, January 23rd, 2021
Sunday, January 24th, 2021

Sermon: The God of “Us” and “Them”

Text: Jonah 3-4¹

Focus: God loves everyone and everything he made and desires the salvation of all people.

Function: That they would love people who are different than them.

Structure: Story Applied

Locus: “We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us” (SC, Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. “Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you’” (Jon. 3:1-2, ESV).²

When the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, he’d already been through the wringer once. Most people know this book of the Bible as the story of Jonah and the whale, but Jonah is much more than a big fish story. Ultimately, it is about the journey of a hateful, spiteful preacher who comes to the uncomfortable discovery that God loves *all* people—not just the “good” ones. In other words, the God of “us” is also the God of “them.”

The story begins in chapter 1 with the LORD God, Yahweh, telling Jonah: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me” (Jon. 1:2). But Jonah was a prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel—and an advisor to the king, Jeroboam II (cf. 2 Ki. 14:25). He encouraged the king in a military campaign of territorial

¹ Actual pericope is only Jonah 3:1-5, 10.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

expansion, extending the boundaries of the diminished northern kingdom back to their glory days as they were under Solomon. Now Jonah may have been a prophet of God, but he was also a patriot, an Israelite nationalist, the king's man.

And Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the king's enemies. Historians frequently mention that the Assyrian Empire was one of the most ruthless the world has ever seen. The Assyrians reduced numerous cities to rubble in their scorched earth warfare. They slaughtered women and children and paraded through the streets with their defeated enemies' heads on pikes. Assyria took wickedness and violence to a whole new level (cf. 3:8). Another Old Testament prophet, Nahum, describes the Assyrian city Nineveh as "the bloody city, full of lies and plunder" (Nah. 3:1).

It was to this wicked, violent city that God sent Jonah. But at first, Jonah refused to go. Instead, he tried to run away from God and his calling. He booked passage on a ship and sailed west—as far as he could go in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

Yet it wasn't fear that kept Jonah from obeying God. It was hatred. Yes, hatred! Jonah *hated* the Assyrians. And, as he admits in chapter 4 of the story, he was worried that if he went and preached to Nineveh, God might forgive and save them—a prospect he couldn't swallow (Jon. 4:2).

To Jonah's way of thinking, Yahweh was the God of *Israel*—and nobody else. Israel was the Chosen People. God was supposed to be destroy Israel's enemies—not *save* them! Jonah divided the world into "us" and "them," the people he liked, and the people he hated. His people were good, and everybody else was bad. This black and white, stark reality was how he viewed the world through the lens of his politics and religion. One might even wonder if Jonah was more patriot than prophet.

Jonah was not the first or last servant of God to divide the world into “us” and “them.” All of us have a natural, sinful tendency to automatically assume that “our” group is better than “others” who seem different to us. We tend to associate with people who look like us, people who dress like us, people who talk like us, people who think like us, people who pray like us, and people who vote like us. Everyone else—the “thems”—are suspect. We may view them as silly, stupid, undesirable, weak, inferior, dirty, wicked, or even sub-human. Psychologists call this phenomenon “othering.” Othering means that we consider only our group to be acceptable and all others to be a threat. Othering means that we divide the world into us and them.

Who are your “others”? Perhaps you dislike people from the “other party,” however you define that. Or maybe you distrust people with lots of tattoos and body piercings instead of people with modest, well-groomed appearances. Some of us just can’t stand people from a different generation, whether older or younger. The Millennial catchphrase is “Okay, Boomer,” while Baby Boomers often look down on Millennials as lazy and entitled. (The Gen Xers stand on the sidelines and watch the carnage). Many professionals with college degrees look down upon blue collar workers, and many people who sweat for a living look at educated professionals as “educated idiots.” Some ultranationalists may regard foreigners and immigrants as a dangerous threat. (Xenophobia is just another form of othering). But you don’t have to be the oppressor in order to “other” others. People and persons who perceive themselves as victims can be just as self-righteous in their anger and vitriol against their abusers or supposed persecutors. In our fallen, sinful world, othering is a way of life. As fallen, sinful human beings, we tend to highlight our differences and turn them into causes for suspicion and distrust. We’re very good at “othering.”

Othering was Jonah's way of life. So what happened to him after he ran away? Well, as we all know, you can never really run away from God (or sail away or fly away). God sent a storm to harry Jonah's ship. The sailors threw him overboard in order to save themselves from sinking. And as Jonah sank down into the ocean depths, God appointed a great fish to swallow him and rescue him from drowning. As a kid, I used to think the fish (or whale) was part of Jonah's punishment. But it wasn't. The fish actually *saved* him from drowning. The fish kept him out of the clutches of death and damnation. Because God loved even the self-righteous, hateful, spiteful Jonah.

After the fish spit Jonah back out on dry land, he journeyed to Nineveh, covered in vomit and smelling like fish. He must have been quite the picture when he showed up in Nineveh with his short and fiery sermon: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). Have you ever heard a preacher get done with his message in less than 10 seconds? Of course, not! Pastors like to preach, and they like to hear themselves talk. Jonah's message is the shortest sermon on record: a mere *five* words in Hebrew!

And how did Jonah's audience respond? "The people of Nineveh believed [in] God" (Jon. 3:5a). They called for a fast and put on sackcloth. The king himself put on sackcloth and poured ashes on his head, declaring that every person in the city must "turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands" (v. 8). Doesn't that astound you? The king of the nastiest nation in the history of the ancient world told his people to put away their violence. That would be like Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin suddenly turning into a pacifist—just completely unthinkable and unheard of! But it happened. Because God's Word changes hearts. The king of Nineveh even held out hope that perhaps, maybe, just maybe, God might even forgive them (v. 9).

And he did forgive them. “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (v. 10). And they all lived happily ever after. The End. Am I right? No, the story isn’t over—not yet.

Well, then, what happened next? The Bible tells us that Jonah pouted. Yes, you heard me right. He pouted. The Lord’s prophet had a hissy fit and threw a temper tantrum. “It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry” (4:1).

Remember: Jonah hated the Assyrians. So even though he eventually stopped running from God and answered the call, he still held onto a gleeful hope that God would wipe his enemies off the map. But God didn’t do that, and Jonah couldn’t stand it. He was so angry that he actually prayed and asked for God to take away his life (v. 3).

Jonah may be the only preacher in history who became angry that his sermon *worked!* I know a lot of pastors who pull their hair out, wondering, “Doesn’t anybody ever *listen* to me?” The Ninevites sure listened to Jonah. His preaching resulted in a successful outcome—the repentance and salvation of the entire city. But it’s not the outcome Jonah desired. So he pouted.

Yet God wasn’t done with Jonah. Yahweh is “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...” (4:2). God is patient, caring, compassionate, and kind. He showed mercy to Nineveh, and he showed mercy to Jonah too.

God crashed Jonah’s pity party and asked, “Do you do well to be angry?” (vv. 4, 9).

And in his self-righteous, self-absorbed, distorted reality, Jonah answered, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.”

And now comes the climactic moment in the story, the critical question that leaves the story open-ended. Like a parent smiling through sad tears, God asks Jonah, “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (4:11). In other words, shouldn’t I have mercy on Nineveh, a city so lost in wickedness and sin that the people didn’t even realize how lost they were? And what about the cattle? Even if I hadn’t spared Nineveh for the sake of the people living there, shouldn’t I at least care about the cows and sheep and cats and dogs? “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt. 10:29).

Jonah never answers Yahweh’s question. What did he say or do? How did he respond? The Bible doesn’t say. Instead, God leaves the question open to you and me. Shouldn’t God have pity on sinners, no matter how strange or wicked they may seem? After all, God had pity on you. Unlike us, God does not divide the world into “us” and “them.”

Jonah discovered that the God of “us” also loves “them.” Who in your life do you need to recognize as a sister or brother instead of an “other”?

God doesn’t play favorites. He is the “one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:6). He “shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). He doesn’t like Jews better than Gentiles or men more than women. He doesn’t love Americans more than the Chinese or Iranians. And he doesn’t love Christians more than Muslims. He doesn’t like Republicans more than Democrats (or *vice versa*). He doesn’t value my life or salvation any more than yours. In fact, he loves and has compassion on everyone—the whole world! Isn’t that what everybody’s favorite Bible verse says? “For God so loved *the world* that He gave his only-begotten Son...” (John 3:16a). God so loved the world—

and everyone in it. That's why he sent Jesus—because he “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3).

God made us all. Every single person on this planet is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). ““In him we live and move and having our being...’ ‘For we indeed are his offspring”” (Acts 17:28). In the words of the prophet Malachi, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us...?” (Mal. 2:10).

God wants every sinful person to repent and turn away from his or her wickedness and turn to God for mercy and grace. God loves Israel *and* Assyria, America *and* China, Democrats *and* Republicans, atheists *and* Christians. God isn't in the othering business. Through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God came down and become one of *us*—a real, living, breathing, flesh-and-blood human being—so that he could die on the cross to save “us” *and* “them” from our sins. God made everyone, God loves everyone, and God saves everyone, even you and me.

Jonah wanted somebody to die, and if it wasn't going to be the Assyrians, then it sure as hell would be him—quite literally, I might say. *Somebody* had to die. *Somebody did* die. *Jesus* died. And as he hanged, dying on the cross for the sins of the world, he looked out over a strange mixture of family, friends, and foes, and then he prayed: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). It sounds like God's comment about the Ninevites: they “do not know their right hand from their left” (Jon. 4:11). So Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them.” And he did. God shows pity, love, and forgiveness for all people. With God, there is no us and them, for “all [are] one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The Lord Jesus is Lord of all. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ~~the~~ the Holy Spirit. Amen.