

Preach It, Jonah!

Scripture text: Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey
Center Church on the Green, November 8, 2020



I have a good friend who spent his working days as a general contractor. He grew up here in New Haven, but spent his college years just across the Winooski River from my hometown in Vermont. We are about the same age, so we know the same hangouts, remember the same events, and share the memory of crossing the border on a Saturday to go to Montreal for a pizza.

Kevin loves working with his hands and organizing jobs, and he put all his skills to good use as a contractor. He can walk into any household between here and Greenwich and win the trust of the most demanding homeowner. He can get his point across to folks with Ph.D's and to a young laborer who dropped out of high school, and do it on an utterly human level. Kevin is a great juggler of people and personalities, and with all of the situations he has had to manage over the years, you'd be forgiven for thinking he was kind of a rough-and-ready guy. You know, skilled at getting his own way, and no patience for fools, that kind of thing.

So, one day while Kevin is working at our house, on a bathroom project that took way longer than it should have because

one of the basic elements didn't arrive—yes, a toilet—I notice a bumper sticker on Keven's truck. It's just a couple of lines of bold text, and as I pulled in it was easy to decipher.

JESUS SAYS:

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR.

NO EXCEPTIONS.

And with that statement, it all falls into place for me. I get how Kevin is so patient with trying people.

But, I also wonder how Kevin can be so patient. With trying people.

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As I speak this weekend we are all taking in the beginning of the end of a crushingly divisive time. You may have heard something about this in the news the past few days.

You see...there's been this big political campaign going on over the past couple of years. Pretty much everyone chose sides.

And not only did they choose sides, but they made it very clear that their side was right, and the other side was oh-so-tragically-wrong. It went beyond civil disagreement and salon discussions. It became, oh, what shall I say? a matter of belief, a matter of faith.

Divisions ran deep. Families stopped talking to each other. Strangers yelled at other strangers for their clothing, their language, their appearance, and yes, their bumper stickers.

Oh, and if you think I'm talking about some other side than the one you favored, think again.

Now, the big political campaign ended yesterday, as far as I know, but the divisions are still there. And one side's believers are dancing in the streets, and the other side's believers are stunned and upset. The divisions are still there.

With the fuel of campaigning now spent, without signs and flags and the oh-so-pervasive advertising that drove the sides apart in the first place, you might believe it's done. But, there is still the small matter of one side wanting to crush the other side. And again, from what I'm seeing it's a mutual desire.

What do we do with that?

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It doesn't help that our Narrative Lectionary seems to be rubbing it in this weekend by landing on Jonah's story. Those of you who know preaching calendars know that the readings are set months and years in advance. It's not like a wizard was sitting up in a tower with a crystal ball and saying, "Hmmm, 2 thousand 20 is

still 12 years away, but wouldn't be fun to make sure that folks are reading Jonah the week after an election? Hhmmm?"

When we open up this book, we have the city Nineveh named in the first sentence. Fun fact about Nineveh: it's a big place, much bigger than New York City. And if you were an Israelite, and you happened to stray into the city-state of Nineveh, the chances were pretty poor that you'd wander out the other end. Hebrews were highly valued in Nineveh. The Ninevite king paid good money for every Hebrew who was captured and killed. Soldiers got paid for every head they brought in. You could look it up.

Jonah's not enthused about carrying a prophetic message to Nineveh. He heads for Joppa—or as it's known today, Jaffa, the south-side beach of Tel Aviv. He intends to run off to sea, and actually boards a boat crewed by commercial sailors.

He almost gets away with it, too. But God's message of mercy for Nineveh cannot wait. God's mission entrusted to Jonah cannot be put off. The sailors understand long before Jonah that his burden is going to sink them all.

And so the message comes a second time: Preach it, Jonah! I can't ignore their situation any more.

And Jonah goes. But not willingly. We expect he's going to be driven to preach eloquently about God's compassion for the

Ninevites and God's desire to win them to a new life freed from their miserable ways. Preach it, Jonah!

Instead he strides just far enough into town so he can't be accused of not actually being in Nineveh. Maybe he's in a marketplace, or maybe on the edges of a residential neighborhood. Well, whatever. Preach it, Jonah!

But instead of eloquence, Jonah utters what every modern preacher is happy to label as "the worst sermon ever"...maybe so we have something to point to when we don't do so well. It's a stinker...guaranteed to be unpersuasive and to not be taken seriously.

[[low voice]] "In forty days Nineveh will be smashed."

That's it. No mic drop, no feedback session. God said deliver, Jonah delivered, to the letter, and walked back out. No doubt he was ready to mark the days off waiting for the Big Forty and the destruction of Nineveh.

And it would have worked, too. Except for one thing: everyone believed him, from king to lowest peasants, and they fasted and dressed in burlap and gave up their Hebrew-skewering and threw themselves on God's mercy.

No thanks to Jonah. And all thanks to Jonah.

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Which leads me back to this question: If the love of God could break through Jonah's unenthusiastic attitude...why can't we do better than Jonah?

Jonah could not stop the rule of love from infiltrating the hearts of the people who hated him. He could not soft-pedal the invitation to change direction that God had planted in his mouth. He could not stop God from restoring Nineveh to a state of grace.

So why shouldn't we do better than Jonah?

We have the same word of repentance as Jonah did. And, we have the teaching of Jesus and the bumper sticker of my friend Kevin to remind us of the great commandment to love our neighbor, no exceptions. They compel us to do much better than Jonah in this time, in this place.

When we are tempted to "run off to sea"...to escape behind our walls and fences and preoccupations...to avoid dealing with our neighbors who may not be happy with us for our beliefs...we are reminded that God's love makes no exceptions. And we can do better than Jonah in these days.

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In these days ahead, may God's love seep into the cracks of our society—no exceptions.

May that love draw us into places and conversations and relationships where we never thought we'd go—no exceptions.

May that love call us to repentance and new resolve to build, together—no exceptions.

And, may the Spirit's healing be at work on us, as the Redeemer's hope energizes our ministries. Amen.