

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 9.24.17

Scripture: Jonah 3:10-4:11

Matthew 20:1-

Sean Spicer was back at the podium this week.

Once the White House Press Secretary, Mr. Spicer resigned a few weeks ago after a notoriously troubled, and troubling, six-month run. Though tasked with communicating the White House agenda, he more often miscommunicated, and maybe even dis-communicated, that agenda — speaking not to disseminate information but disinformation. He insisted upon absurdities (like the size of the crowd at the inauguration), seemed to resent being questioned (though it's essential to the role he was in, that members of the press question him), and attacked and undermined the fourth estate on which most serious-thinking people know democracy depends. Democracy depends upon a well-informed public, and a well-informed public can only happen with an independent press. The relationship between the press and the government is necessarily adversarial, but Mr. Spicer took it up a few notches, to be accusatory, hostile.

After a frustrating few months, he finally resigned.

But he was back at the podium this past week. On Sunday night, at the Emmy Awards, he came out from behind a curtain just as host Stephen Colbert was talking about how impressive, and large, the crowd was watching the show. Spicer confirmed it: it would be the largest crowd ever to witness the Emmys. Period.

A take on his insistence that Mr. Trump's inauguration was the most watched inauguration in all of history, period, this got a good laugh from the audience. It should be said, though, that the audience was clearly surprised by Spicer's appearance, not something anyone would have expected or could have anticipated. So it's fair to say some might regret their going along with the joke.

It seems they did. The week between last Sunday night and now has been loud with pushback against Sean Spicer as someone about whom we can all have a good laugh. Too soon, many have judged. The harm he did, and the harmful administration he gave voice to: it's simply too soon because, of course, no time has passed at all. The harm he was party to is still being done. The attack on democratic norms, the routine abuse of words, the persistent

undermining of any critical news stories now cast as “Fake News”: none of this is funny, not yet, and maybe never will be.

It’s said comedy is tragedy plus time.

As to how much time is needed to perform such alchemy, that depends on how tragic is, or was, the tragedy.

It all has me wondering, this morning at least, how long it was between when the Assyrians did their worst to the Judeans and the story of the prophet Jonah came into popular knowing.

Best guesses are around 300 years.

The Assyrians annihilated the land and kingdom of Judah in the year 722 BCE. Their brutality was renown, as recounted at least in the books of Nahum and 2 Kings. And their capital city was Ninevah, the same city to which Jonah, the main character in this story, which arose around the year 400, was meant to go, to prophesy to the people there, “to cry out against it,” as the Lord is said to have said in his call to Jonah, “for their wickedness has come up before me,” he explained.

But Jonah didn’t want to go. As he made clear later, “O Lord! ...This is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

This is what had happened, of course. “When God saw what they Nnevites did, how these Assyrians turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”

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These people, these terrible people: it should be said of these imperial warmongers, which had been historically real and now were comically remembered, that they did apparently change their ways, and moreover that they did so according to the story because of Jonah’s crying out to them. So, it’s not for nothing this book is included among the prophets of the Bible. Though it’s a narrative and not a collection of oracles and verses, though it’s more fanciful and fantastical than the other fourteen prophetic books, it is yet considered among the books of prophecy, and for this—because it features someone whose call and cry among a people do result in the people’s changing their ways.

Not that Jonah was happy about that. Not that he actually wanted to accomplish the prophetic task. He didn't want his announcement of coming destruction to be motivating; he wanted it to be a sealed fate that he could happily tell them about: "You horrible people are going to get what you deserve." But he suspected from the start that it wouldn't be so. Jonah suspected from the start that God would change his mind and not bring the calamity that would be so satisfying to witness.

It's interesting to me that Jonah suspected this without a question as to whether the *people* would change. He didn't spend a moment's thought on that, on whether the people would repent before receiving the grace Jonah knew God would give. No, Jonah's thinking was focused on the Lord, whom he knew to be "a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." It's especially interesting to me because Jonah is the reason they changed, something he either seems not to think is a possibility or is something he wants no part of. He seems to have been content to let the Assyrians continue to be Assyrians, and for punishment to come upon them accordingly—even though he also suspected that was never gonna happen, not with this sort of God as Lord.

So he hopped a ship to take him in the opposite direction. But the ship became storm-tossed such that the crew grew afraid and searched out the cause for the storm, which they found in the person of Jonah. Jonah insisted, then, that they throw him into the sea, thus getting rid of the problem and securing their wellbeing once again. The crew prayed before they did so, that they not become guilty of innocent blood. Then they tossed Jonah overboard. Presumably, the ship and its crew were safe once again.

As for Jonah, along came a great fish, which swallowed Jonah up and swam with him inside for three days while he prayed a quite serious prayer, only then to be vomited him up on dry land, where the word of Lord found him once again. "Get up," it said to him, "go to Ninevah, that great city..."

This time, he went.

I take all this to be funny. I think this story, this book, is meant to be funny. And I know, it's hard to hear biblical stories as funny. We're so accustomed to taking the Bible seriously. We're so steeped in the assumption that the realm of religion is serious business, (which we take to mean humorless business) that to consider something we find in the Bible silly might feel disrespectful, blasphemous. But, come on, a fish? That's just plain silly.

As astonishing, even absurd as many of the miracles in the Bible might seem, a giant fish is, I think, plain silly. Consider: most other miracles can be understood, if not on their terms, then at least in what their implications are. A bush that burns but is never consumed: this has profound implications as to the nature and purpose of God. Jesus walking on the water of another storm-tossed sea: this has profound implications as to how Jesus responds to overwhelming, even violent, circumstances (by not succumbing to them).

But, a giant fish coming along at just the right moment? It's tough to see in this much depth as to what it might imply about God. It is, however, pretty funny; and I'm never going to criticize laughter as something that isn't also of God. I'm never going to dismiss an opportunity to laugh, not even in church.

So, what about when God, having noticed Jonah sulking for God's not destroying the people of Ninevah, appointed a bush to grow over him, to provide him shade, so to save him from discomfort: that's comical. But then God appointed a worm to eat the bush so it withered, and he appointed a sultry east wind to get Jonah's attention. It's a goof.

And can't you relate to it? Haven't you ever tried to get a laugh out someone you think is overacting, nursing a grudge or chewing the scenery with their own sense of tragedy? I do it all the time with my boys. Just two days ago, they were telling me about someone who disrespected a teacher so badly that, when her mother found out, she denied her daughter the use of her iPhone, leaving her only to use a flip phone. For a month!

"A flip phone?" I said, aghast. "Whatever will she do? Whatever will become of her?!"

The boys got the joke. Their sense of tragedy, they recognized, was maybe misplaced. That problem isn't really all that problematic.

The thing about Jonah and the Ninevites, though: their problems were problematic. The Judeans had suffered terribly under Assyrian assault and rule. Their nation had been scattered, their land had been laid to waste.

But maybe enough time had passed. Maybe they could joke about it...? Maybe even joking about it would help in the acceptance, the reconciliation. Assyria would not go down in a blaze of punishing fire. The Assyrians would continue to exist. And the Judeans would continue to exist. And they'd be neighbors. For centuries, millennia, these two peoples would be neighbors. History would prove long in each of their regard, so story might usefully be funny in their regard. It might help if these two peoples could share a laugh.

Jonah sensed as true something about God (or better perhaps to say that the teller of the story of Jonah sensed as true something about God) that Jesus would, 400 years hence, be remembered as having more seriously implied. That God's justice doesn't conform to our sense of justice, that God's generosity doesn't conform with our wish for revenge: in the parable Matthew remembers Jesus to have told, Jesus seems to be suggesting that whether you labor long for the sake of God's kingdom among us, or for just an hour before the workday is up, you'll be rewarded the same. As if to abide with God isn't something that's doled out in degrees, as if to abide with God is absolute: that's the nature of it—there's no partial, second place, almost, abiding with God.

Would we, therefore, be jealous because God is generous?

I'll confess that I'm comfortable when this notion of grace applies in a purely spiritual sense, or when I keep it in the theological or religious realm. When I'm challenged to consider God as gracious in the way that the landowner in this parable is shown to be gracious, I can get with it. I do not mind at all that my sister, who goes to church a lot less often than I do, will be welcome in the kingdom of God. I do not balk at all at the notion that the person who kept prank-calling us one night a while ago is as beloved of God as any of us here are. I can even imagine my dining at the Lord's Table in glory seated next to Sean Spicer and maybe even across from Anthony Scaramucci. All of this is fine with me. A universal God who is working universal salvation is actually truly good news to me, and I imagine it might be for you as well. That there's hope for us all: halleluiah!

But when it comes to living amidst that kingdom even now, when it comes to building up that kingdom even amidst this pained world, things become more problematic. I didn't find Sean Spicer's appearance at the Emmy Awards funny, not past the initial surprise of it. I'm not ready to let Mr. Spicer back into my good graces, and I'd find it disturbing indeed if we all just said in regard to his work as Press Secretary, "Let's let bygones be bygones." Not when all that he made possible and tried to make normal is still on-going, isn't so bygone after all; not when it's a harm continuing to be done to our democratic norms, to our need as human beings for facts to be recognized as facts and for falsehood to be called out as falsehood and for words to matter that truth might prevail.

So how are we to live this out? Or is it just me? How am I to live this out? Resentment is tough to set aside, to overcome. It justifies itself and builds on itself. It becomes a stumbling block so big I simply get over it.

“Get over it!” Now there’s a phrase...

How are we, am I, to get over it?

I think prayerfully and patiently. I think we’d be right to pray for the time when, like the Judeans as regarded the Assyrians, we will happily set aside our desire that those who offend us will get what they (clearly!) deserve. I also think we’d be right to be patient in the coming of that time, to honor what damage has been done, to grieve what’s been lost, and to resist further harm—but all in a true hope that one day there will come forgiveness and even reconciliation.

Because a funny thing happens in the story of Jonah—the audience of it at once identifies with Jonah in his desire for his version of justice while also laughing at Jonah for his being so silly and small-minded. This means this story might challenge us both to own our desire for our version of justice while also holding in lightness the possibility of our silliness and small-mindedness.

It’s tough, I realize. It might even seem offensive—that we, in the name of our faith, should make of real, historical offenses the stuff of silly stories in the same vein as the story of Jonah. There’s just so much in history that I don’t think I’ll ever manage to find funny, so much that’s on par with what the Assyrians are said to have done to people who got in the way of their imperial aims. But who knows? History is long, and justice is far grander than anything anyone of us could imagine.

I remember one Sunday here a few years ago. In this little tiny congregation, we as usual gathered worship and even passed the peace, though among us were a German-born woman, a Japanese-born woman, a man raised as a Jew, and roomful of lifelong Christian Americans. I was struck by how unremarkable a thing this felt to be at the time. No one mentioned it. No one, it seemed, even noticed it. I did only after the fact. And, no, we didn’t crack jokes about concentration camps and atomic bombs. But it *was* just a few short decades since the time when what divided the Japanese people from Americans, and Americans from Germans, and Germans from Jews, seemed unimaginably insurmountable. And now here we were: “The peace of the Lord be with you.” “And also with you.”

Forgiveness and reconciliation are possible. These things often take a lot of work—work that’s best named in religious terms even amidst our secular world. “Truth,” “confession,” “absolution,” “restoration.” These things are weighty undertakings. So I wonder how humor could help in making lighter that burden. I hope it might. I suspect it could. Jonah, this silly story, suggests it does, rightfully and even righteously does. As for Sean Spicer, it’s too soon. But I pray for the day when, truth and respect restored, this whole thing strikes us as funny.

Thanks be to God.