

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.20.30

Jonah 3:10-4:11

When God saw what they did, how they 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. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That 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. 3 And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6 The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 10 Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (377)

Our COVID numbers in Berkshire county are good right now. Daily new cases have been in the low single digits for each day of the last week, except for Friday which had ten new cases. We've suffered only three deaths in the last week and had suffered none in the month prior. Though with an eye on this possible uptick, we're doing well here. We're taking strong measures, and we're doing well.

The problem is that we don't know whether we're doing well *because* of the strong measures we're taking or if the fact that we're doing well means we can ease up on taking such strong measures. We don't know that, and I don't know if we *can* know that. I suppose there's some probability-calculating that someone out there could do to close in on a conclusion. But, isn't it always a tricky thing? To figure why what *could've* happened *didn't* happen, to figure out why what could happen doesn't: it's a trick, that figuring.

The problem of not being able to pin that down would make alarmists of us all. Chicken Littles everywhere.

This is the problem of the prophet. When people heed the prophet's cry, and the calamity warned of doesn't come to pass, is that because the calamity wasn't such a possibility after all, or is it because the people heeded the prophet's cry, took wise counsel and caution, and the calamity was therefore avoided or mitigated? Was the people's exercising caution a foolish overaction or a wise move that helped?

Jonah wanted nothing to do with this problem. This is why, when the Lord called him to Nineveh in the East to prophesy to the people there, he went in the opposite direction, to Tarshish, likely in what is now southern Spain.

Because, remember Y2K? Remember how people promised calamity with the turn of the millennium, how computers the world over were going to crash, and the electric grid would quit working and grocery store shelves would go empty and the supply chain of all things would come undone? But none of that happened—so what fools we were ever to have worried, and what fools they were who warned this would happen! People say this all the time about Y2K: much ado about nothing. (But don't forget, every once in a while you'll hear a quiet voice remind us. Don't forget that people took action to make the calamitous not come to pass. It's not that Y2K didn't happen; it's that Y2K was avoided because of the concentrated efforts of many, many people to help us all avoid it.)

This question is driving me crazy—are we overacting to a low-level threat or it is a low-level threat because of our effective action?

Almost daily, I ask myself, “Wait, what are we doing, and why are we doing it?” Suddenly shocked all over again, I run through it all. “We've shut down in-person schooling! We've shut down indoor restaurant dining! We've shut down our church meetinghouses! What? Why?”

But then I remember, we can't give this virus another way into our lives. We must quash its opportunities for taking over. It's *that* catchy. It can be deadly. It's sometimes devastating, immediately so; and, as to its long-term effects, we don't know. We do know it hardly affects most of the people it infects, yet those whom it does affect it can affect very badly. So, we must not give it a toehold. We must not give it a way back in, because once it's in, it's off and running—until we have a vaccine that's both effective and available, which won't be for a long time, second or third quarter in 2021 at the earliest. So say the latest predictors of these things, the ones who decided

not to head in the opposite direction when the call to prophesy came, but who persisted amidst this epidemiological, social, and political storm.

Poor Jonah. Silly Jonah. He knew that if he went to Nineveh and proclaimed against the city in the Lord's name, that it's likely the Lord would be ready to relent from punishing, that the just desserts of the Ninevites' grotesqueries wouldn't come to bear on them. And then the people would suppose that Jonah was a fool to have believed in such calamity, and Jonah himself would be made to wonder whether the promised calamity was ever actually going to come to pass or whether the Lord was just a softy when all is said and done.

Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love: who can trust someone like that to be fair?

For this, Tarshish: Jonah hopped a ship. But on the way across the Mediterranean, a storm surged and threatened to wreck the ship. The crew of the ship did a quick reckoning, asking each on board to pray to their god that the storm might pass and the ship be safe. This had Jonah admit to the crew that he was actually going against his god with this trip—not overland to Nineveh but over sea to Tarshish. So, they threw him overboard to save themselves, at which point a fish grabbed him and swam him to back whence he came, throwing him up on the shore, “spewing him,” according to the story.

This is a very silly story.

And it got worse, because, though Jonah began to proclaim in the streets of Nineveh, “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown,” it never came to pass. Nineveh was not, in fact, overthrown.

Meanwhile, the people changed their ways. Upon hearing Jonah prophesy that Nineveh shall be overthrown, the people proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth. Even the king, when the news reached him, rose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself in sackcloth and ash. And he had a proclamation made in Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered in sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows?” decreed the king. “God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

And who *does* know? Who knows, indeed, if it was their repentance that made it happen (made it *not* happen), or if God's mercy would have won out no matter what, or if their wrongdoing what would have caused calamity (violence begetting violence) and therefore their ceasing in wrong-doing made their future that much brighter? Natural consequences and all. Who knows? You just can't read history backwards. You can't draw counter-factual conclusions conclusively.

When this isn't a silly story, it's a snaring one.

For what it's worth, I really do think this book is a silly story, a comedy. You might not have picked up on that. Maybe you're not much in a laughing mood these days. Lord knows I'm not. Plus, there's the fact that it's hard to hear comedy when it comes to the Bible. We presume seriousness here, utter seriousness. Worse, we presume earnestness, as if nothing *this* purportedly authoritative and *this* supposedly worthy of our devotion could also be light, even silly. But I think this book *is* comedy, even broad comedy because all of its details are just too over the top. The prophet featured is just too childish—having a tantrum in a booth he built for the purpose of having a tantrum; and God's treatment of him is just too teasingly parental—planting a fast-growing bush to give his childish prophet just enough shade to make the loss of it, when the bush gets eaten by worm and dies, cause for doubling down on that tantrum.

I think it's a comedy to cast in new light what it's actually like to be a prophet—no easy thing. And that's what this book has been taken to be—a book of prophecy. It's even classified as such, slotted among the Minor Prophets in the layout of the Bible. So called because their books of prophecy are shorter than the ones left behind by the so-called Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), these Minor Prophets left behind shorter collections of oracles or poems. Though they each spoke from times of calamity, either prior to or amidst, they left behind but a hundred or so verses, while the Major Prophets left for us hundreds of verses.

But not Jonah. His "prophecy" is mostly story, and most silly story at that. Israel and Judah feature not at all. The calamity thought to be coming never does, and the people said to suffer it don't feature anywhere else in Scripture. This was likely not even a story that originated in Israel or Judah but was imported from another people, maybe just for fun.

As for prophets, they might seem to us like religious sorts. But that's just because they come down to us through the ages by way of our religion, and they speak truth to the people in the name, and often in the words, of the Lord. What they're doing though, in doing so, is reading and

interpreting the signs of the time with an assumption that, as time rolls on and the tides of history shift, God is at work in that mix.

Really, when the so-called prophets were active, mostly from the 8th century to the 5th century before the Common Era, they functioned more as those in government do today. Isaiah and Jeremiah, to name two, functioned like the State Department in their concern for what the region's empires were up to, and how Israel and Judah should (and shouldn't) respond. Joel and Elijah, to name two, functioned as if in the Department of the Interior, dealing with the plague of locust that was devouring the peoples' crops or with the years-long drought that made the people have to flee to Egypt.

What made them prophetic is that they often said such things to a recalcitrant people, and to a king whose hearing about such things had become hard. Prophets suffered in their position of not being listened to and yet not being able to stop talking, so committed were they to the facts of the matter. They suffered for their burning devotion to the Lord, or to the truth, or to what they could not deny they saw in their reading the signs of the times. They suffered for their desperate hope that the people would have a future that was bright, all while the power structure and the establishment made it so what they had to say was met with refusal, anger, even punishment. Jeremiah would end up in prison. Others would be stoned, even to death. Still others would die destitute. Remember Jesus weeping over Jerusalem? "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" Apparently, the powers-that-be have never liked fending with the truth.

It's not a stretch to say Anthony Fauci is operating as a prophet—both in his telling us painful facts about where we are with COVID and how long we'll be here, and in his facing increasing pressure from the administration, our would-be king, to shut up about it all. It's not a stretch to say that the CDC, in being cast as obstructionist, even accused of sedition, is filling the classically prophetic role. Certainly, those who continue to speak of climate change while the west is on fire and the south is under water are doing the thankless work of prophecy.

These are heavy lives to consider.

It can sometimes feel like too much.

It can be something of a relief to consider it more lightly. Shakespeare took up some pretty heavy topics in his comedies—using comedy to critique the monarchy, a project that would

otherwise get him hanged. Charlie Chaplin attacked with silliness industrialized capitalism when it was ascendant. Richard Prior went after anti-Black racism with a slyness that still snaps today.

But maybe you're not in a laughing mood. I get it. It's not for nothing that this book was probably written down at a time of calm. Whereas all the other Biblical prophets spoke from times of calamity, this silly story comes to us from a time of relative calm, likely the 5th or 4th century, when the people were settled back in their land, the 2nd Temple was up and running, the imperial forces were Persian and were mostly uninterested in these tiny kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and everyone had some time for a laugh. "Remember when it seemed like calamity was around every corner? Yet we were sustained? Ha-ha!"

Maybe we're not there—not now, not yet.

So hear this instead: God sustains. God is yet with us and sustains us. The Lord guides us and hopes for us, beckoning to us from the safe side of the storm, while though journeying with us through the danger of the storm. This we know and see demonstrated in the sustaining presence and persistence of the Church, your Church. We're here this week, one more Sunday worship service outside and on Zoom later today. Cold is coming; cold is already here. We're making plans for what to do next, for how to continue to be together as fall arrives (on Tuesday) and winter looms and COVID remains with us for who knows how long. We're taking precautions because these might indeed help us avert disaster, and we'll rejoice if those precautions one day seem ridiculous. If one day we laugh about all this worry, then God bless that laughter.

Meanwhile, bundle up, mask up, let your gentleness be known, and vote.

Thanks be to God.