

All Saints Sunday - Jonah and God's Mercy

November 6, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 18:13; Jonah 1: 1-17; 3: 1-10; 4: 1-11

*Lord, May the words I speak be those You want spoken,
may the words we hear be those You want heard. Amen*

“The November first feast day of All Saints “is when the “church recognizes the thin veil between life and death and remembers that the church includes all who have gone before us and now are glorified, [and all who followed, and those] yet to be born.”¹ Through Jesus we experience this divine mystery — “proclaiming that the dead are still a part of us, a part of our lives, and are even an animating presence in the church. St. Paul describes the saints as “a great cloud of witnesses,” so when they have passed, we still hold them up, hoping perhaps that their virtues — their ability to have faith in God in the face of an oppressive empire or a failing crop or the blight of cancer — might become our own virtue, our own strength”² through the Lord who empowered them and unites us.

We have pictures of some of those saints in our sanctuary today — a partial cloud of witnesses who have spoken God’s love, God’s grace, God’s wisdom into our lives. Were they perfect? Maybe in our memories but in reality, they were like us — that strange, unsettling and marvelous mixture of saint and sinner, God’s beloved child and God’s rebellious, prodigal son or daughter. That is who we are, too. At baptism God has claimed us as God’s own saints forever and every day we find big and small ways to tarnish our haloes and need washing again in God’s forgiveness. We are saints and sinners. But more important than who we are is who God is — gracious” and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (Jonah 4: 2b) I imagine, like most of us, Jonah loved God for this — but not when it applied to people he deemed unworthy.

There were good reasons for Jonah’s hostility toward “those people — those Ninevites.” Nineveh was capital of the Assyrian Empire. Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. When the Southern Kingdom of Judah plotted with other nations to resist Assyrian control and taxation, Assyria then turned its considerable and brutal power on Judah. If you visit the British Museum, you can see spectacular wall reliefs” that archeologists discovered in the Nineveh palace of Assyrian King Sennacherib. [suh-**nak**-er-ib] Those reliefs picture Assyrian sieges, including one of the walled city of Lachish, an important Hebrew city that was on the way to Jerusalem. That relief depicts the bodies of “Judeans being impaled [on the city’s wall], and stacks of Judeans heads that were counted

by Assyrian scribes, presumably for a pay per head policy with soldiers.”³ In other words, the Assyrian armies were known as bad . . .guys. Cruel, unforgiving and oppressive.

Whether or not we are to imagine Jonah had family or ancestors captured, tortured or killed by Assyrians, it isn’t hard to understand why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh.

There would be good reason to fear for his life — even God speaks of their wickedness. But when Jonah finally does go after his unpleasant cruise in a big fish, we discover the heart of his objection to this mission to which God has sent him. “The only reason God would send a prophet to proclaim destruction rather than simply destroying it, was to give Nineveh an opportunity to change their ways.”⁴ Jonah did not want the Ninevites saved. When finally Jonah arrives, he goes only one-third of the way into the city, “preaches the shortest sermon ever recorded. It’s a sermon of five words in Hebrew — translated, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown.’ The response is electric. Immediately, the people of Nineveh believe God . . . The people declare a fast.”⁵ The king throws his weight into the matter. All humans and animals are to dress in sackcloth, fast from food and water, “and bellow out their repentance to God in hopes God will spare them. And indeed God does.

You might think Jonah should be ecstatic. After all, he’s [one of the most] successful prophets in the whole Bible. He has brought about a mass conversion — every human and animal alike has repented.”⁶ But Jonah is furious and brooding. Jonah confesses that God’s loving, gracious nature is the very reason he didn’t want to bring God’s message to Nineveh. He just knew God would pull that merciful, forgiving “thing” and well, the Ninevites just didn’t deserve it. In a nutshell, Jonah is angry because God loves too many people. He sees it like this ---- God should love us but God shouldn’t love Ninevites, Nazi’s, members of al-Qaeda or ISIS, drunk drivers, criminals or anyone else for whom we hold a hidden or open disdain. But sorry, Jonahs ----- God loves everyone. Not necessarily what they think or do but God loves the prodigal son and the son who didn’t want to celebrate his brother’s homecoming. All Jonah sees is that God loves and gives the Ninevites forgiveness and another chance. He seems to ignore that God saved *him* in a big fish and gave him another chance. Amid all his pouting, Jonah doesn’t seem to notice how God doesn’t give up on him either. God keeps trying to invite him into the party, into the freedom of repentance and the joy of forgiveness. Will Jonah come around?

Nadia Bolz-Weber, Lutheran mission developer of the House of Saints and Sinners in Denver Colorado, recounts her Jonah pout one All Saints Sunday. They not only had photos of loved ones but also mementoes, candles and marigolds. It was a moving remembrance until she spotted the name, “Alma White” printed on a card on one of the tables. Months earlier, she had walked with a parishioner in the city, where they “noticed a sizable memorial of sorts in the courtyard of “The Pilar of Fire” church across from the Colorado capital building. The inscription on the memorial read, “Alma White founder of the Pilar of Fire Church, 1901.” Nadia immediately got excited. Did a woman plant a church in Denver in 1901? Here Nadia was trying to start a church in twenty-first century Denver. Did she just stumble on a “role model?”

She pulled out her phone and googled Alma White. Excitedly she read aloud Alma White’s entry on Wikipedia: “Alma Bridwell White. (June 16, 1862 - June 26, 1946) was the founder and a bishop of the Pilar of Fire Church. (*‘Oh my gosh, it’s true,’* she thought) She went on to read that in 1918, Alma White became the first female bishop in the United States. She was noted for her feminism (*alright! Nadia thought*) and her association with . . . (*a very long disappointing silence*). “What?” the other woman asked. Nadia continued: “She was noted for her feminism and her association with the Ku Klux Klan, her anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-Pentecostalism, racism and hostility to immigrants.” I won’t repeat the word Nadia used to express her outrage.

The next day Nadia called her Episcopalian friend, Sara, to tell her the story of how she thought she had a hero only to find out she was just a lousy racist. Sara’s response? “E-mail me her name. I’ll add her to the Litany of Saints along with all the other broken people of God.” Nadia writes, “I didn’t want Alma White’s name on the Litany of Saints. Having her name lying on the table . . . alongside the names of Saint Francis and Cesar Chavez, felt wrong . . . On All Saints’ Sunday,” Nadia writes, “I am faced with sticky ambiguities around saints who went bad and sinners who were good . . . [I have to face that] it has been my experience that what makes us the saints of God is not *our* ability to be saintly but rather *God’s* ability to work through sinners . . . What we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or perfection but the fact that we believe in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in the world through, of all things, human beings, all of whom are flawed,” like Jonah and you and I.

What Jonah could not appreciate and we are asked to understand this All Saints Day is that God is — gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for *everyone* — it is God’s gift freely offered, not owed, earned or deserved by any

one person more than another. We can't put limits on God's grace, God's reach, God's determination to reach each and every one of us. This All Saints Day we remember that it is God who made it possible for these saints, here in photographs and in our hearts today, to live splendid and flawed lives that touched and inspired us to faith. On this All Saints Day before an Election Day that has us anxious, disheartened, frightened and divided, the story of Jonah reminds us that God loves Trump, Clinton, the supporters and opponents of each. On All Saints Sunday, we humbly and boldly remember that whatever happens this Tuesday, God will continue to reach out to heal, forgive and save us all from the brokenness and fear that threatens to distract us from the hope and love we have in Jesus — Jesus, raised from the dead so we might know all creation and each of us can be, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 11/4/16

ENDNOTE

1. Nadia Bolz-Weber, Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People NY: Convergent Books, 2015 p. 3. (adapted)

2. Bolz-Weber, p. 5.

3. Facts in this paragraph from Roger Nam's "Commentary on Jonah 1: 1-17; 3: 1-10 [4:1-11] as posted on www.workingpreacher.org

4. "Preaching Theme" included in November 6th Worship Resources provided through subscription from Clergy Stuff

5. Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Commentary on Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org (adapted)

6. Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Commentary on Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org