

A Message from Robin+

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 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. Jonah 3:1-5,10

Charles Dickens' novel, "A Tale of Two Cities" begins with these memorable words, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." They are memorable because they are so true, in all times. This week as we begin four years with a new President, it's probably safe to say we are all feeling conflicted, just as we are every four years when this change occurs, even if a President is elected for a second term. Our nation will always be made up of people who think it is either the best or the worst of times.

Plenty of people have thought the last four years were the worst of times, and plenty are already thinking the next four years will be the worst. Conversely, many have thought them the best of times. It's the reality of a democracy – we all get to have opinions and vote and work toward what we believe to be best for our democracy when it is our assigned responsibility.

I think the story of God and Jonah might be able to help us this week and beyond, in our politics and in the rest of life's challenges. God asked Jonah to go preach repentance to Ninevah, a city with a reputation not unlike Washington, D.C. This was a lot like God asking a Republican to preach to a room full of Democrats, or vice versa! Jonah said no thank you and got on a boat headed in the opposite direction. You know the story. There was a storm, Jonah was thrown overboard, and a giant fish swallowed him whole. Jonah spent three smelly days inside that fish, a sort of divine time out chair to give Jonah some space to think about things – not things he wanted, but things God wanted.

When the fish spit out Jonah onto dry land, God again asked him to go to Ninevah. Jonah went this time and preached the shortest sermon ever, five words in Hebrew and just eight in English, "Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" So Jonah went, but he was not happy about it. He stomped the whole way, grumbling under his breath, and only went about one third of the way into the city. But it was enough. The people of Ninevah heard this short, powerful sermon, they repented, and God forgave them.

You might think this would be the end of the story, but wait! There's more! Jonah, the patron saint of grudge holding, was furious that the people repented, *and* that God forgave them. Because he could not bear the thought that God could love people who were sinful enemies, Jonah put himself in time out, pouting and angry in a booth outside of the city, and other interesting things happen to Jonah as he works through his anger. Before the story ends, God and Jonah have a good heart to heart conversation about mercy and forgiveness.

It's a good story for us to hear right now because many of us have gotten quite good at judging and grudge holding. Being exhausted from a pandemic has contributed to that, as have our divisions around politics and racial injustice. Perhaps we have become like Jonah, unable to rise above our anger and hatred, all too willing to relish the failure of those we dislike. All too eager to point a finger and cast blame on the other. Who do we want to see fail? Who would we like to see God smite? It's worth pondering, what is your Ninevah?

Here's the thing though, God didn't share Jonah's opinion. God doesn't play favorites and, no matter who the party or person is, God will see to justice, and God is always willing to extend forgiveness and mercy. The story of God and Jonah, just four chapters long, can be read in a few minutes. Maybe it will bring you some comfort and a new perspective as it has brought to me, because there are times when I can be just as much of a jerk as Jonah, yet God can still use me to do great things – God's things.

Image: Jonah and the Whale by Herbert Mandel