

## Repentance – Not Sexy but Needed for National Healing

Jonah 3:1-10 and Mark 1:14-20

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on January 24, 2021

Do-overs. I've never met anyone who hasn't wished for a do-over. That head-slapping, Homer Simpson moment of, "Doh!" followed quickly by, "I wish I hadn't of done that." Do-overs tap a longing for a chance to re-do a moment, a choice, or a behavior with a better frame of mind and more principled behavior. Every so often you'll hear a celebrity or other public person say, "I have no regrets!" This is usually followed by the advice to not look back and that the only way to live life is to look ahead. As with many such statements, there's a shred of truth in it. But for a lot of us, it's just simply not true about our own lives. Especially for Jesus followers, I think. Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark come after he's baptized by John, after God announces Jesus as the Beloved Son, after the Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he's tempted by satan and waited on by angels. Jesus' first sentence in the Gospel includes a command to repent. It's not a great hook. Imagine trying to start a new group and telling everyone that their first task is to list all their wrongs and change their behavior. Yeah, not too sexy.

Jonah knew that the method of introducing yourself with the command to repent was dead in the water. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and announce repentance to the King and all the people there. Imagine going to the people that you're most afraid will hurt you and demanding their repentance. The Ninevites of Assyria were those people. They were militarily dominant in every way and vicious with their opponents, ultimately destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel and oppressing the Southern Kingdoms.<sup>1</sup> Jonah had every right to be afraid. He was also understandably angry that God would forgive his greatest enemies. He knew that God was "a gracious God and merciful, abounding in steadfast love."<sup>2</sup> He did not want God to be THAT God to the Ninevites.

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<sup>1</sup> Beth L. Tanner, Professor of Old Testament, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Jersey. Commentary on Jonah 3:1-5, 10 for January 25, 2009. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-jonah-31-5-10-2>

<sup>2</sup> Jonah 4:2

Jonah ran away the first time God told him to go to Nineveh and demand their repentance. He was tossed over the side of a ship in a storm and ended up in the belly of a fish only to be thrown up on the shore after he did what? After he himself repented. Jonah was given a second chance by God to go preach to the Ninevites who did indeed themselves repent – covering every king, man, woman, child, and animal in sackcloth and ashes, crying out “mightily to God,” and turning from their evil ways and the violence in their hands.<sup>3</sup>

Our Jewish cousins in the faith read the book of Jonah “on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Jews confess their sins against God and neighbor.”<sup>4</sup> It’s short book. Four brief chapters. Go ahead and read Jonah this week. It’s the only time it bubbles up on the three-year lectionary cycle of Bible readings for worship. It’s an incredible example of the very human reactions that accompany both societal and individual repentance – including Jonah’s anger that his enemies would receive God’s grace. That’s the part of Jonah’s tale that is the most offensive. There’s a particular kind of happiness we feel when we see our enemies fall and the farther they fall the better. Jonah’s understandable anger for God’s forgiveness of the Ninevites mirrors our own. It’s too difficult to believe that God’s grace extends to those we hate. But God’s grace is indeed the last word.

Recently, an unchurched friend of mine texted to ask if I could hear their confession and we did so. Individual confession follows the general order of confession, discussion, and forgiveness. During the discussion, we talked about consequences for what was being confessed including making amends to the people affected by the confessed behavior.

Grace is the last word in the confession and forgiveness. God’s forgiveness frees us to navigate the consequences for our hurtful behavior.

Along that line, the question was asked recently in staff meeting about the role of the church during this time of national crises. It’s a question that I’ve asked myself off-and-on over the last couple of decades. There are books full of attempts to answer this question over the centuries. The general consensus is that if God so loves the world, then the church is not only about my personal, spiritual benefits

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<sup>3</sup> Jonah 3:8

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

from it. Several of our worship readings during the past few weeks gave a challenge of repentance including John's baptism of repentance, Jesus' call to the disciples to repent and follow him, and Jonah's proclamation to the Ninevites to repent. We have heard plenty of it today as the Bible stories immerse us in repentance.

The role of the church in society is similar - although not as the bedroom vice-squad that polices who people are sleeping with, which is too often the case. The role of the church emphasizes Jesus' example, the one whom we follow. Our own repentance for personal and collective sin holds us accountable and redirects our behavior. From our own accountability, we may challenge others to do the same. In times of national crises like the pandemic and the chaotic transition of presidential power, we may challenge elected officials and public leaders who have hurt people by what they have done and what they have left undone. The church may hold powerful people accountable across the spectrum of partisanship and the roles of those involved for greed, indifference to the poor, harm inflicted, violence incited, and more - powerful people like former President Trump and other leaders who fanned the flames of violence to the ones who stormed the Capital seeking to harm those in Congress. The attack happened under the American flag, the Confederate flag, and symbols of the Christian church. The symbols of the church were especially offensive because we follow Jesus. The Jesus who told Peter to put his sword away as Jesus was being arrested is the Jesus we follow. The Jesus who called public leaders to account for the violence of failing to care for the widow and the poor is the Jesus we follow. The Jesus who would rather die than raise a hand in violence against the world that God so loves, is the Jesus we follow.

Ironically, our countries' violent roots began with people fleeing religious violence only to perpetuate that violence on the native people who already lived here and the enslaved people who were brought here - all in the name of white superiority and divine blessing. As a country, we continue to perpetuate violence in the name of God without pausing to repent for that violence, to collectively experience the consequences, and to make amends to the black and brown people who have borne the brunt of nationally sanctioned and inflicted violence. Talk about taking the Lord's name in vain.

Obviously, accountability is not the only role of the church. During national crises we also comfort people who are scared, grieving, alone, and hungry. We comfort each other in our congregation and reach out to comfort family, friends, and neighbors. There's a saying that the church, the body of Christ, "comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable," following Jesus' example and teaching.<sup>5</sup> That remains true in times of calm and in times of crises.

In Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark, he proclaims good news and repentance, and announces, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near."<sup>6</sup> Repentance turns us away from our self-absorption towards the good news of Jesus. Good news that includes loving our neighbors (not always an easy task), loving ourselves (an often much harder task), and loving a God who loves us first, last, and in-between. A God who loves us so much that we are not left bound to the sin that clings so closely but free to live differently in the world because God loves us and our neighbor. A God who slipped on skin to show us how it's done and forgives us when we fail. A God whose offensive, radical grace is the last word. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Stewart. "God comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable." August 5, 2013. Dictionary of Christianese: The casual slang of the Christian church...authoritatively defined.  
<https://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/>

<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:15