

I

When I was a freshman at the University of Missouri, the head men's basketball coach at the time was a legend by the name of Norm Stewart. Coach Stewart was born and raised in Missouri and was himself an alumnus of the University, and as a native son, he had been brought up to loathe everything about the state of Kansas. Even though the campuses of the University of Kansas and the University of Missouri are less than two hundred miles apart, Coach Stewart always saw it that whenever his teams had to play in Kansas, they didn't spend a nickel there. They always filled up the bus and fed the team in Missouri before crossing the border into Kansas.

II

Rivalries like the one between Missouri and Kansas, or Georgia and Florida, are part of what makes college athletics so compelling. There's something deep within us, I think, that enjoys learning about the history and greatness of "our team" and also delighting in the defeat of those we have deemed to be our rivals. And football fields and basketball courts are a great place for that natural human tendency to find an outlet.

But we also know from both a survey of human history and our own individual experiences that that natural human tendency toward tribalism has a shadow side. The rivalry between Missouri and Kansas didn't start on the gridiron – it started on the battlefield, in the years leading up to the Civil War when Jayhawkers from Kansas and Bushwhackers from Missouri slaughtered each other, convinced that their side was the right side, and the violence they perpetrated on the other side was carrying out "God's will."

These have been difficult days in our land, and many of us are still processing the election results and what they tell us about who we are as a community, as a state, and as a nation. I have a sense that for many of us, this particular election wasn't just about a difference of ideas about policies and theories of government. For many of us, this election felt deeply personal.

And so as we're coming to terms with the results and wondering about the aftermath, I think we're also wondering about that huge percentage of our friends and neighbors and colleagues and family members who voted differently than we did. Are they still on "our side," or have they crossed the border, so to speak? And as people of faith, we're still wondering, where is God in the middle of all of this?

And those kinds of questions lead us to our story for today.

III

This Fall, we've been doing a high-level overview of the Old Testament, and last week, we were introduced to a prophet named Elijah. As we said last week, usually, the job description of a prophet is to bring a message to God's people when they have turned away from following God's ways. Usually, a prophet's message is something like an internal family conversation – most of the prophets in the bible are speaking to the Israelites or their kings.

But not Jonah. Jonah is a prophet who is sent “outside” the family so to speak. God calls Jonah not to bring a message to the people of Israel, but to the people of Nineveh.

Nineveh was to ancient Israel what Kansas was to Missouri's Norm Stewart. If you were a true Israelite, you generally tried to avoid dealing with Nineveh at all costs. There was a bloody history between the two nations that went back generations, and both sides still had long memories and short fuses.

And so when the word of the Lord came to Jonah and said, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me,” Jonah didn't say, “Yes sir,” and start marching east. He didn't say, “No thanks,” or even, “Can I think about it for a bit?”

No, Jonah set off in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh. He went down to the coast and boarded the first boat he could find, and as the text puts it, “he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.”

But if you've been to Sunday School or watched Veggie Tales, you know what happened next. The Lord sent a great storm upon the sea, and the sailors soon figured out that this was no ordinary storm. And so they turned to their passenger and interrogated him, and Jonah confessed that he was a Hebrew who was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

Jonah told them to throw him overboard, but the sailors rowed hard for land. But still, the storm grew more and more fierce, and so the sailors prayed that God would not make them guilty of innocent blood, and then they picked Jonah up and tossed him overboard.

Immediately the storm stopped, the sailors feared the Lord even more, and Jonah was swallowed whole by a large fish, where he spent three days and nights.

And with that background in mind, I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Jonah, chapters 3 and 4.

3:1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 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. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then 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. 8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." 10 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.

4:1 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?"

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

As Carol pointed out to me this week, if one aim of preaching is to convince people to turn away from sin and violence and to turn to following God's ways of being

in the world, you could make an argument that Jonah went to downtown Nineveh and preached both the shortest and most successful sermon in history.

“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” he cried. And the people of Nineveh believed God, and everyone, great and small, showed contrition for their sins, and even the King of Nineveh himself proclaimed that all shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.”

And when God saw that the people of Nineveh were serious about the work of repentance, when God saw that they were serious about doing the work of justice and righteousness in their land, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring about.

And it made Jonah furious.

Because Jonah was ready for God to “own the Ninevites.” Jonah was all set to finish his prophetic message, go set up shop on a hill outside of town, make some popcorn, and watch the fire and brimstone reign down on those Ninevites.

But when that didn’t come to pass, Jonah was hopping mad.

And this next part is Ryan’s Revised Translation of the Hebrew.

Jonah said to God, “I knew it! I knew that you are a gracious God, merciful and slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing. Just kill me now.

But the Lord said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry? You’re all in a lather about a bush and a worm, things that are here today and gone tomorrow. You’re all mad about things over which you have no control or say. It’s true that the Ninevites don’t know their left hand from their right, but that doesn’t mean that I’m not concerned about them and their well-being, too.”

IV

I suspect, my friend, whatever your political leanings, perhaps you’re angry about some aspect of the election results or the general direction of our community, state, and nation. And I suspect that if we were to sit down 1-1 and talk about it, I might empathize or even sympathize with some of that that anger you’re feeling.

But this question that God puts to Jonah twice in this story keeps haunting me this week. Is it right for you to be angry?

There is no doubt that the Ninevites were in the wrong. Right at the beginning of the story, even God says, “Their wickedness has come up before me.” And it may in fact be the case that the millions of your fellow citizens who cast their ballot differently than you did are indeed wrong about so many of the most pressing issues of our day, and you

may have very well been expecting that the results of this election would represent their “destruction” at the ballot box.

But that question that God puts to Jonah twice in the story keeps haunting me. Is it right for you to be angry?

I think one of the things that has happened to all of us is that in the times in which we have live, you and I have been conditioned to believe that we are “the good ones,” and they, whoever they are, are “the bad ones.” Our side is “righteous,” and their side is “wicked.”

And it’s true that sometimes that is indeed the case. There are indeed moral absolutes in this world. The Lord *requires* that we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God. The Lord is *deeply concerned* with the poor and the oppressed.

But as I read back through this story again, I asked myself – “Who in this story listened to God’s Word, expressed heartfelt contrition for their sins, and repented, and who, when God called, to them, turned and ran as far as he could in the opposite direction, and ended up smelling like three-day old fish guts? Who in this story led those around him to turn from their evil ways and to release the violence in their hands, and who sat there under a dead bush like a sullen child asking God to kill him because God didn’t do what he thought God should do?”

The biblical truth, my friend, is that you and I are human, which means we are complex. Some days, we hear God’s voice, and we soften our hearts and return to God’s ways, and some days we hear God’s voice and do our very best to run away from the presence of the Lord. None of us are all one thing, nor are we all another.

And here’s another biblical truth – in all of your complexity, in all of your ambiguity, in all of your righteousness and in all of your wickedness, God loves you so far beyond your human ability to comprehend or understand it. God so loves you that God gave God’s one and only Son for you. God became incarnate and died and was raised again for you not because you got it right, and not because you got it wrong, but because God is God, and you and I are not.

And here’s the thing, my friend. Those people who see the world differently than you do – you may be right about them; they may indeed not know their right hand from their left. But that doesn’t mean for a second that God doesn’t love them. That doesn’t for a second mean that they are not full human beings made in the spitting image of their divine parent.

And that can be a hard truth for us to accept. It was a hard truth for Jonah, and he was a prophet of God. And so perhaps that's why, in his inaugural address as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says this:

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.'*¹

Notice, my friend, that Jesus didn't say you have to like your enemies. He didn't say you have to baptize or endorse an ideology that is antithetical to the gospel and oppositional to God's will for the blessing of *all* the families of the earth.

But he did say you have to love them and pray for them.

And so that's your homework this week. Your homework is to spend some intentional time each day in prayer for those who voted differently than you did – who see the world so much differently than you do.

As a preacher from Georgia, who himself was perhaps a prophet of God sent to call us back to God's ways of being in the world, reminds us:

Of course, this is not practical. Life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog...

My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos.

Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which have surrendered to hatred and violence.

For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way.²

Amen.

¹ Matthew 5:43-45 (NRSV)

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," in *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 56.