

Nineveh—Road to the Unexpected

The Book of Jonah Chapter 3

Opening Prayer

Welcome, welcome, welcome. I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it's for my healing. I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions. I let go of my desire for power and control. I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval and pleasure. I let go of my desire for survival and security. I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person or myself. I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within.

Amen. Father Thomas Keating



Settle Down

Take some time to settle yourself and calm your mind. Breathe deeply and invite the Lord into your awareness. Review where you have been and what you have been doing for the past 24 hours. When did you experience God with you during that time? When did you feel absent from Him? Thank Him.

Scripture Reading

Read Jonah chapter 3. When were you recently surprised and how did you react? How do you identify with Jonah in this chapter?

Nineveh—Road to the Unexpected

We strike a bargain, abet an unconscious one. “You are our God and we are your people; therefore, bad things should not happen to us. Bad things should happen to bad people.”

If there was an empire that deserved the label “bad” (and there are many), Assyria was at the top of Jonah’s list. During the seventh and eighth centuries BC, they gobbled up territory, exacted tribute, and enslaved conquered peoples. Little Israel was no match for big, bad Assyria. Unfortunately for Jonah, Israel’s god, Yahweh, had other plans. Yahweh sent his reluctant prophet to preach judgement. Jonah not only preached judgement, he expected it because ruthless Nineveh deserved it. But then the unexpected happened; the people of Nineveh, from the king down to the street beggar, repented. They went the whole nine yards with sackcloth, ashes, fasting, praying, and pleading for mercy. What were the odds that “bad people” would respond with such conviction to the preaching of a foul-smelling foreign prophet?

And what are the odds that “bad” thing will happen to God’s well-intentioned servants in our day and age? Consider the former IVCF staff who moved his family to Los Angeles to serve the urban poor only to have his nine-year-old son killed in a drive by shooting. Or consider Bruce, who moved his family to Tajikistan to witness to their Muslim neighbors, only to have his wife and daughter develop Chronic Fatigue Syndrome; or Doug, who moved his family to Latin America to serve with IFES only to have his daughter molested and then endure years of psycho-therapy to recover. We don’t expect our most

passionate and articulate staff to lose their faith, get a divorce, or abuse a student but it has repeatedly happened. Like Jonah, we make our plans but Yahweh sometimes has other things in mind. Suddenly our blood pressure rises and life gets very interesting.¹

Readings for Reflection

Out of the experience of suffering an invitation is found. As our brother Job learned, our presumptive contracts are delusory efforts by the ego to be in control. We learn that life is much riskier, more powerful, more mysterious than we had ever thought possible. While we are rendered more uncomfortable by this discovery, it is a humbling that deepens spiritual possibilities. The world is less magical, less predictable, more autonomous, less controllable, more varied, less simple, more infinite, less knowable, more wonderfully troubling than we could have imagined being able to tolerate when we were young.

From James Hollis in Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life, p. 85

In the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not the result of the concentration camp influences alone. Fundamentally therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. Dostoevsky said once, “There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.” These words frequently came to mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost...the way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life. He may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decided whether he is worthy of his suffering or not.

Viktor Frankl in Man's Search for Meaning page 75-76

St. Francis believed that we could catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than a gallon of vinegar. He taught us to preach the good news at all times and only when necessary to “use words!” This is the Franciscan way. We learned from Francis not to rail, denounce, or judge others’ beliefs or actions (‘hard prophecy’), but to try to do it better ourselves. We were never to criticize others, not even church leaders, but to live in a simple, shared and non-violent way that shouted good news and joy to the world. As we say in our Core Principles, “The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.”

Richard Rohr

John Calvin saw the human heart as a relentlessly efficient factory for producing idols. Congregation commonly see the pastor as the quality control engineer in the factory. John Calvin's insights plus Henry Ford's technology equals North American Religion. Living in golden calf country as we do, it is easy and attractive to become a successful pastor like Aaron. *Eugene Peterson in Under the Unpredictable Plant*

Benediction

Jesus, no one expected you to suffer the awful things you had to endure at the hands of religious people just like me. No one expected the Son of God to die; the author of life can't die. And no one expected you to return from the dead and not be as mad as hell for how we treated you. Your forgiveness and mercy know no bounds. And when, like my brother Jonah, I try to put bounds on your mercy, stop me. But please be gentle because, I'm not very tough. I get discouraged very quickly, also like my brother Jonah. Amen

¹ Artwork (Acrylic Collage on Paper, 12 x 12 inches, 2019) and Reflection by Steven Stuckey