

Good cold Sunday morning, still from a hill in Belfast.....

Mercy is on my mind this morning.... mercy is the bottom line of my sermon text based on Jonah 3:1-5, 10 from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Jonah was a prophet, and apparently a reluctant one. The book of Jonah is only four chapters long. Reading it today, in it's entirety, might be a good thing to do, as we wonder about our future now. Verse 9 of Chapter 3 of Jonah (which is not in the assigned reading) has the king of Nineveh saying, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

Who knows.... what the future will bring for us? We are in a new time now. I am still at my brother's unit at Penobscot Shores in Belfast, helping him out as he continues to recover from a painful amputation of part of his left little finger. I look out the window this morning as the sun rises and see the American flag flying high and gloriously in front of the Ocean House (part of Penobscot Shores). I look at that flag and see hope in the midst of the question "Who knows?" what the future will be bringing us in coming months and years.... I do know this: mercy will always await us....

I know I've said this before, **AND** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, **AND** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... Your support spurs me on and gives me hope for the future of us all....

Blessings to each one on this fourth Sunday of the new year..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT to download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in.... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermons to Federated's Facebook page....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, January 24, 2021  
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet  
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

**A Call to Worship**

Oh God, our light and strength in former times,  
be our light and strength this day!  
Help us to seek you and behold your beauty.  
Call us to follow you,

even as we remain separate from one another this day,  
and worship you through cyberspace.  
Let us worship the God who beckons us to new life,  
and stands ready to offer us mercy no matter what!  
Amen.

### **Psalm 62:5-12**

*For consideration before reading the Psalm:*

*“Using the image of balance scales with two pans suspended from a crossbar, the psalmist insists that all human beings are weighed, judged, by God – rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike. The ‘heavyweights of the world – the movers and shakers, the rich and famous – have no weight, no gravitas. Their self-importance is a delusion. Their end of the balance scales goes up instead of down. But the same is true for the weak and vulnerable, the poor and defenseless, the victims of injustice. They also have no weight, no substance. Neither rich nor poor, neither powerful nor powerless, are able to secure their own lives. Both are ‘lighter than a breath.’” (Allen C. McSween, Jr., in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*)*

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God.

God alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

Trust in God at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before him;

God is a refuge for us.

Those of low estate are but a breath,  
those of high estate are a delusion;  
in the balances they go up;

they are together lighter than a breath.

Put no confidence in extortion,  
and set no vain hopes on robbery;

if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this:  
that power belongs to God,

and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.

For you repay to all according to their work.

### **Readings of Scripture – Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

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 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.

**“Forty days more...”**  
**A sermon based on Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

Will you pray with me. Patient and merciful God, have patience with us and be merciful to us, even when we are impatient with you and do not understand your mercy and all of its ways. Amen.

United Methodist Bishop and preacher, William Willimon comments about our passage for this morning this way: “[This text] includes the world’s shortest and worst sermon in the entire Bible.... Jonah delivers his one sentence, five-word (in Hebrew) sermon, packs his bags, and prepares to head home. No illustrations, no poems, no pithy slogans or alliteration, just ‘Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.’ The response to [his sermon] is the greatest in the entire Bible. The people of Nineveh all repent. They start fasting, they all put on sackcloth from the oldest to the youngest. The king, even the cattle, repent! Dogs, cats, kings – everybody repents.”<sup>[1]</sup>

I love Willimon’s commentary on this passage! But I found myself this week most intrigued by the first three words of Jonah’s sermon, “Forty days more....” (Jonah 3:4) God doesn’t tell Jonah to set a certain number of days before the certain downfall of Nineveh will occur. And God doesn’t tell Jonah that Nineveh will necessarily come to ruin. God simply says in the beginning of the book of the prophet Jonah, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:2)

It is Jonah’s reaction to God’s instruction, and the reaction of the people of Nineveh to what Jonah says, that hold the most question and the most promise in the story. This is even though the bottom line of the story is that God’s mercy far outweighs God’s wrath and sense of justice.

Jonah takes it upon himself to determine what God means.

Jonah thinks God means the people of Nineveh have forty more days to carry on their evil ways and then they're dead, by God's doing. That's what Jonah wants to believe God means because he's an Israelite, and the people of Nineveh have become enemies of the Israelites. The Israelites had come to believe they had a favored status with God, and that God's compassion and mercy were not to be shared with other nations.

The people of Nineveh hear what they want to hear in Jonah's angry proclamation. The people of Nineveh think Jonah hollered, "Fire!" and they all immediately run out of the burning building in which they have been living.

Jonah wants no part of this group of people who have been enemies of the Israelites. They are not worth dirt, as far as Jonah is concerned. They are not worthy of his time, or of God's consideration. Jonah turns away from God in his hatred for these people.

The people of Nineveh see the light and repent. They turn towards God now, rather than away.

Here's the question for the day – it is a tough question: Who are YOU in this story? Whose side are you on? Are you Jonah, filled with anger and hatred toward those he doesn't like and longing for their downfall? Are you the people of Nineveh, seeing the error of their ways and turning toward God in repentance? Are you an agent of the merciful God, who sees through the conflict and hatred swirling about and declares ALL are capable of repentance, a turn toward God, and worthy of mercy?

The book of Jonah was written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. It speaks of a time and a conflict that can seem far removed from our contemporary world. But there is a very important message for us, as the conflicts of our time continue within our country and around the world.

Who is the United States in this story right now? Jonah, the people of Nineveh, or the savior of the world? There is much at stake for us, considering how we see ourselves as we move forward.

Will we have "forty days more" before the continued dissensions among us escalate yet again?

Will we have "forty days more" before words of peace and cooperation begin to resonate louder than words of hatred and conflict?

Will we have "forty days more" before some other national or worldwide catastrophe diverts our attention from the hot box we are sitting in at the moment?

Strife and disagreement over politics, the wearing masks to help stop the spread of the covid virus, and the best economic policies to use to move us forward are still confronting us.

I have to confess that this has not been an easy sermon for me to write, nor is it an easy one for me to deliver. For I know we are not all of one mind about the direction in which our government is now leading us. We are at a crucial point in our country's history. And the dissention within and without our borders continues to grow. It is time to reflect upon the lessons of our sacred scriptures in the clearest, deepest and most profound ways.

“In Judaism, the story of Jonah is read for the services of Yom Kippur, a day to reflect on and repent of one's sins. It is shared not as a true story in terms of facts, but as a story of profound truth. How does this story help us reflect on the ways we have turned from God, and how we might turn to God again in trust? How do we hear the essential truth of it and around the fascinating mythic story: [the essential truth] that God is merciful and loving and that our relationship with God depends on our willing reflection and repentance.”<sup>[2]</sup>

How do we come to accept the wideness of God's mercy that goes beyond national borders, beyond religious differences, beyond politics, and beyond cultural distinctions, so that we might hear God's commands and God's questions to Jonah more clearly?

In the closing verses of the book of Jonah, God says to him, “Is it right for you to be angry.... about that for which you did not labor and which you did not grow.... and should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jonah 4:4, 9-11)

“Forty days more,” Jonah threatens the Ninevites. (Jonah 3:4) What shall WE do in the next forty days? How shall we turn – toward God and mercy, or toward political might to make right in the midst of the struggles facing us?

In closing, join me in hearing this prayer written some years ago based on this passage from the book of Jonah:

“Loving God, we live in a world that is ever-changing, yet your love remains constant. We give up on you, and on ourselves, sometimes – but you do not. We think you for calling us to be prophets, disciples, and ministers. Sometimes we answer quickly, and sometimes slowly, yet in all times, you accept us.

We pray this day for all who hear your call and who respond. Help us to embody your compassion for all of creation in all we do. When we say ‘yes’

quickly, channel our enthusiasm to do your work. When we say ‘no,’ don’t give up on us, but guide us back.

When we give up, get overwhelmed, burnt out, discouraged, give us rest, and energy to carry on. Fill us with your spirit that we may speak your word, love your people and care for your creation without limits. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.”<sup>[3]</sup>

### **To hold in our prayers this day.....**

**A**nd hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

**A**nd all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

**A**nd all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

**A**nd pray for our new President, and Congress, that they might do the right things in office for the betterment and future of all of us.....

**A**nd add to our prayers, extended family members of Sandra Caron who all have the covid virus – Allie in Maryland, and Dan and his wife and stepson in Buffalo, NY; “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; and continued prayers for Hank Cary, Ed Lee, Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, ....

***Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.***

### **A Benediction**

*May God bless you and keep you.  
May God’s face radiate upon you  
and flood you with grace and tender mercies.  
May God smile upon you always  
and cover your life with peace.  
Amen.*

**Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)**

**For Sunday, January 31, 2021**

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

**Words to ponder today about “mercy”.....**

*“A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.” ~ Pope Francis*

*“All the great things are simple, and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope.” ~ Winston Churchill*

*“You desire that which exceeds my humble powers, but I trust in the compassion and mercy of the All-powerful God.” ~ Saint Stephen*

*“I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.” ~ Abraham Lincoln*

*“Heaven have mercy on us all – Presbyterians and Pagans alike – for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending.” ~ Herman Melville*

*“My god is all gods in one. When I see a beautiful sunset, I worship the god of Nature; when I see a hidden action brought to light, I worship the god of Truth; when I see a bad man punished and a good man go free, I worship the god of Justice; when I see a penitent forgiven, I worship the god of Mercy.” ~ Edna St. Vincent Millay*

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[1]In *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2003, p. 18.

[2]In *Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany* for January 26, 2003, p. 80.

[3]Ibid., p. 85.