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“Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness” (Psalm 51:3).

Jon 3:1-10; Luke 11:29-33

The story of Jonah is one of those tales whose main point gets lost in the fantastic details of shipwreck and being swallowed by a whale. The original parable was directed at Jewish tribal nationalists who rejected the idea that God might be bigger than their own personal deity and cherished status as the Chosen People. They rejected universal salvation, especially for their enemies, because they wanted God to destroy other nations to vindicate Israel.

Jonah was a reluctant prophet because he did not want the Ninevites to repent and escape punishment. He was disappointed when they did repent, and he had to learn the lesson of God’s gratuitous mercy by receiving it himself. Jesus used the story to rebuke his contemporaries for rejecting God’s grace. He was the sign of Jonah to his generation. If the evil Ninevites repented, why won’t they, having God’s loving messenger invite them to hear Good News? Instead, they hardened their hearts against him.

What is interesting about Jesus' choice of a biblical example was that the story of Jonah was a comedy. The actors are caricatures, the story is ridiculous, and the outcome is almost a morality tale for children. Jesus uses it to shame his critics to repent, to change their ideas about God, to be open to a love that expands beyond their narrow, nationalist hope for vengeance. God loves the whole world, sinners and righteous alike. Jesus' death and resurrection will accomplish salvation for all, and the image of him being swallowed up by death and rescued from the deep will become the sign of Jonah in Christian tradition.

The lesson for us now is simply the urgency of reading the signs of the times and knowing our own need for conversion. The narrowminded and hardhearted spirit of our age has been exposed by the pandemic, gross economic inequality, climate change and global divisions that are threatening the survival of the world. God is offering us a way forward through mercy and reconciliation, responsible stewardship and the willingness to put the common good ahead of national, regional and personal interests.

Jesus shocked his contemporaries by saying, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah" (Luke 11:29).

We cannot imagine him saying that to *us*, but if it is true, we need to know the sign of Jonah. Crisis reveals the opportunity we get from repentance. Our hope for the future means both a change of heart and a change of direction away from self-destruction toward the Beloved Community God wants for all of us together. If we fail, past generations will rise up to condemn us, and even more consequential, future generations will as well.

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