

## RECONCILIATION--THE REAL TRUTH

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

<sup>1</sup>The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. <sup>10</sup>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.

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This past summer, my office, the Office of Black Church Studies, led a Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope to Uganda and Rwanda. During that sacred journey, we were able to see the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and hear first-hand accounts of persons who survived amongst 500,000 people who were killed. We visited churches, schools and communities where people had been shot, chopped, mowed down and the more. Almost instantaneously, we felt infused with deep pain. During the pilgrimage, we learned of neighbor turning against neighbor, pastor turning against parishioner, children turning against parents to preserve ethnic specifications manufactured by their European colonizers. The Tutsi were given elevated status to that of the Hutu which lead to an ongoing saga of infighting which climaxed with the 1994 showdown. According to Desmond Tutu, this was probably one of the most graphic scenes of black-on-black brutality and crime in modern history.<sup>1</sup>

As we eavesdropped on the story of the Rwandan people, I had to wrestle with my anger...

...anger against a world that claimed ignorance about this incident as a way of absolving herself from intervening in a preventable situation;

...anger against Rwanda's European forefathers and foremothers who refused to let go of their political and economic possessions in Rwanda and who were puppeteering elements related to this incident;

...anger at a God who left young babies to nurse from their dead mothers as their only source of survival;

...anger against a church that allowed her leaders to be seduced into handing their congregations over to Hutu rebels as mass human sacrifices;

...anger at the Hutus and the Tutsi for allowing themselves to be deceived and manipulated to this magnitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

Someone was the mastermind behind this mayhem and they needed to be punished just like those who facilitated chaos, terror and dislocation for those in Ireland, Israel, Palestine, South Africa, Kosovo, the Congo, Lithuania, Southern Sudan, Northern Uganda, Peru, and yes even the US. They needed to be punished... Yes, they needed to be punished... Too much had happened. Too many people had suffered. In some regards, maybe Israel and Nineveh (also known as Assyria) were no different than the Hutus and the Tutsi or our American fore parents. The bottom line is that Israel and Assyria were not friends and their animosity for one another was mounting.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking for Jonah, I could imagine him saying, "Yahweh, how absurd for you to suggest that I go to Nineveh of all places to prophesy. Are you kidding, God?" Could it be that as we have exegeted this text that we have bought into a hermeneutic that has deviated from the intended message? Look at the realities that Jonah was faced with. Assyria had done almost everything in the book to Israel and what they had not done to Israel by this point in history they were going to do eventually.<sup>3</sup>

The Assyrians committed everything from mass murder (genocide), to rape, to plunder, to exploitation, to the deportation of the Jews. The Assyrians were ruthless. In Jonah's mind, the Assyrians had to be stopped. The thought of Nineveh receiving a "get out of hell free card" probably made Jonah want to puke. I can imagine Jonah crying, "Lord send me to minister to anyone else but the Assyrians please!" There wasn't even a guarantee that Jonah would make it out of Nineveh alive. So, Jonah simply decided to take matters into his own hands. He didn't want to take any chances. So, he "ran for the border". Yes, he did buy a ticket to Tarshish and attempted to run as far away from this situation as possible.

Have you located yourselves anywhere in this story yet? What a complex scenario. "This is more than a call to ministry story. This is a story about reconciliation"<sup>4</sup> However, what a painfully complex situation? Jonah was in a mess, a big one at that. The tension that he felt was not much different from the tension that we feel as we have excavated the complexities and the messiness of the ministry of reconciliation.

The ministry of reconciliation isn't as "sexy" as we think. I know this because as the director of the Office of Black Church Studies, I live in the tension of this every day. Because there seems to be so much at stake, we too tend to resist

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<sup>2</sup> James E. Fird, *The Old Testament Writings: History, Literature, and Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Anthea Portier-Young, "Oral Communication," (2006). According to Dr. Portier-Young, the Assyrians did eventually destroy the Northern kingdom post-Jonah.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. According to Dr. Portier-Young, the Jonah text is all about reconciliation. The Jonah was prevalently used by the early church as a formational text.

the call to be present with the "other", especially if they have caused us pain. And we tend to resist the call to deal with the real issues surrounding our brokenness. It was easier for Jonah to run than it was for him to stay. When the situation got hot, it was also more popular for him to take a nap on his cruise to Tarshish than it was for him to be caught hanging around the Ninevites. The Assyrians had wreaked havoc on Israel for years. If Jonah went to minister to them, he might be labeled as a "sell out". The Assyrians did really deserve to be punished for all of their abominations. They really did. As one of my colleagues put it, they deserved to die...

However, look at how God works. He gives Jonah a second chance and consequently gives the Assyrians a second chance too!

- Yahweh issues a ludicrous call. Jonah is called to minister in a hostile environment; however, God extends divine patience, grace and mercy as Jonah struggles to respond affirmatively to the call. The beauty of this story is at the same time that God is angry, he pursues Jonah and ultimately provides him with sanctum in the belly of a big fish (a whale, let's say) and God gives Jonah another chance to say, yes, to the call.
- Like Jonah, we can't sleep too long. We can't retreat in the fish's belly too long. We can't flee to the gates of the city too long. We can't run to the margins of our ministry situations too long. Lives are literally at stake. The deliverance of our enemies; the deliverance of our oppressors; the deliverance of those who are trying to kill us is dependent upon our willingness to prophesy, to speak, and to serve as God asks us to. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Christian martyrs knew this all too well. Lives are literally at stake and our own redemption, our own transformation is also at stake in such scenarios, which leads me to my next point.
- Power and complete justice belongs to God. The Assyrians deserved to die according to human justice; however, God's justice was and is much broader than human justice. God had created the Assyrians. She had carved their names in her hand also, so that she would not forget them. God loved them.<sup>5</sup> God had room in her heart to love both Assyria and Israel. Israel's election did not disqualify other peoples from experiencing God's forgiveness, grace and mercy. God had the capacity to change her mind and to give the Assyrians another chance just as God had done for Israel time and time and time again.
- It was important for God to demonstrate love for Jonah, Israel and Assyria because their physical and spiritual destinies were tied to one another. Whether we like it or not, our human destinies are linked. I am my sister and brother's keeper while at the same time, I am being kept. Our destinies also depend upon the way we regard our enemies. As Roberta Bondi put it, "Our life and death is with our neighbor".<sup>6</sup> Israel would have never imagined the Assyrians to be the recipients of God's love,

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<sup>5</sup>Efird.

<sup>6</sup>Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

forgiveness and grace; however, God had a different vision. Israel did not dictate her own access into the Divine family nor would she dictate the other beneficiaries of Yahweh's gifts. Another way to look at it is as Samuel Proctor put it, "Everybody is God's somebody."<sup>7</sup> I will add everybody including, "the good, the bad and the ugly."  
So what do we do with all of this?

The reality is that while Jonah needed to find a constructive place to put his anger and while he needed to find a way to see the Assyrians, to see humankind in the way that Yahweh did. While Jonah had some issues to work through, he was probably right about the Ninevites. Maybe he knew that they would quickly put on sackcloth and ashes for a photo opportunity to boost their public image. They did have a bad reputation. They even put sackcloth on the animals too. Was that a media strategy or what? Maybe they were just playing on God's emotions.

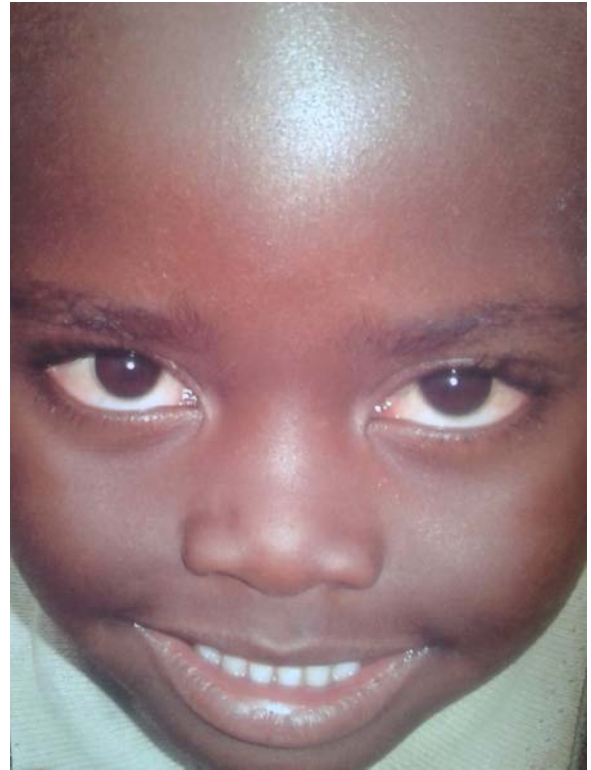
Who knows what their motives were for appearing like they were sorry for their past sins? Who knows their motives for appearing as though they were willing to accept their neighbor's invitation to engage in constructive conversations around avoiding the violence and power plays of the past? The Assyrians really put on a good show. They made everyone think that they really got the clue this time and God changed her mind. Jonah was right. They **were** going to turn around and do the same thing again; however, the inevitability of this reality was not Jonah's "fish-to-fry". The same people that he prophesied to, the same people that he ministered to, the same people that he offered deliverance to were likely going to turn around and kill him later; however, isn't this what Jesus did?

Jesus accepted the call to minister in a hostile, evil world. We and our ancestors deserved to die; however, Jesus looked upon us with the loving eyes of the Father and shared himself, he shared truth, he shared the good news, he shared his life with us! He invited us all, "the good, the bad and the ugly" into the Divine family—knowing that some of us would betray and even kill him. He allowed himself to be murdered and he took sanctum in the belly of the earth for 3 days but on the third day he rose with all power in his hands. He rose with all of the keys to the doors that are designed to lock certain groups of humankind out of the dining room where his table is set. Yes, his table where every nation and tribe are called to join in the feast of the divine family.

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<sup>7</sup>Samuel Proctor, *Sermons from the Black Pulpit* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984).

And we can know this as we obey the will of God in our lives, as we prophesy unpopular things to unpopular people. My prayer is that the baby in the picture will help us to see the world with the compassion that God sees us. While we were on pilgrimage this summer, Jessica Terrell took this picture while we were at a Free Methodist Church in Rwanda. This congregation was still wrestling with the tension of what it meant to live together as Hutus and Tutsi after the genocide. This baby was a part of that congregation. I don't know about you, but when I look into this baby's eyes he invites me into a new reality, I want this baby to have a safe, peaceful and prosperous future. All of this time, it never occurred to me whether this child was Hutu or Tutsi. I refuse to ask the question. I simply want everything that God wants for this baby and other children and other people like him around the world. What do you think?



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