

The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
January 21, 2018  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Cor. 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

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### **Something's Fishy**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I was blessed to attend last week a press conference in the city council chambers. That press conference announced the re-formation of Bloomington United. Many of you will recall that the organization was originally established in 1998 in response to the distribution of hate literature throughout the community, and, eventually, the murder of Korean graduate student Won Joon Yoon by former IU student Benjamin Smith. Smith was influenced, believe it or not, by a church—the World Church of the Creator. It is actually an organized hate group. Now known just as Creativity, it calls itself a pantheistic, white separatist, white supremacist, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian religion, and it is classified as a Neo-Nazi hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Over the years, Bloomington United has been active in responding to incidents of hate in the community fostered by such groups. It also offers educational forums related to issues of diversity. Under President Bill Clinton's administration, the organization was recognized by the White House for its work in addressing hate in our community whether in response to racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, or attacks on Muslims or other minority groups.

In recent years, members of Bloomington United took on responsibilities within their individual faith, cultural, or justice communities in response to the rise of white supremacist groups in this country. As a result of the tragedy in Charlottesville, VA, this past summer, community members expressed a desire to bring the group together again.

At the press conference, Rabbi Sue Silberberg, among the group's leaders, spoke to the continuing need for public response to hate groups. She quoted Martin Luther King, Jr., who said "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." The group is recommitting itself to educating and acting on issues related to affirming the value of all human beings, bridging the differences between people, and resisting and responding non-violently to hate activities in our community. They produce and distribute related materials including yard signs declaring "Hate Has No Place in Our Town."

Our own Doug Bauder has been among those who have led the group over the years, and we thank him for his commitment to justice, along with all those who support such work. May God bless all who do this holy work.

So why do I begin with this? Perhaps you have already noticed that we have before us this morning a well-loved story that is both humorous and tragic. It's about the joy—and eventually, the shame—of hatred, personified in the troubled personage of Jonah.

This poor shlub, who toes the contemporary line of hating Assyrians and all things related to Assyria, is nonetheless called by God to deliver a message of repentance to those accursed people in the capital of Nineveh. You may not recall that Assyria had conquered Israel back in 722 B.C., so a century or so later Hebrews like Jonah considered theirs a well-informed and righteous hatred.

Now, please be aware that my tongue is firmly in my cheek whenever I speak of “righteous hatred.” Such a thing does not exist. But Jonah, no doubt, thought it did.

Complicating Jonah's call is his pretty good understanding of who the God of Israel is. He knows that the Lord is “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” That's chapter 4, verse 2 in the book if you'd like to look it up.

So, knowing God's gracious nature, and flummoxed that God would call upon an evil people to repent—running the real risk that they would indeed repent—Jonah high tails it in the opposite direction. Of course, God would have none of that, and so ensues the fantastic story of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish who provides what must have been pretty disgusting passage to the accursed nation in question. Hence, in part, the title of the sermon, in case you wondered: Something's Fishy. You'll pick up on more of the reasons for the title as we go along.

Okay, now. We'll avoid here the obvious scientific and practical questions related to the story and move on to the moral—which is really where the action is. And the moral of this story has to do with God's unrelenting grace for all peoples, regardless of what a culture or a president or a congress or a troubled history might otherwise indicate. The moral of the story is that “Hate Has No Place in Our Town.”

Or, “Hate Has No Place in Our Politics.” Or “Hate Has No Place in Our Hearts.” And, by the way, how incredibly tragic and ironic is it that “tough language” about other nations has contributed to political failure related to justice for dreamers and children. And no, I don't consider that a political statement. I consider it to be a statement demanded by God's grace reflected comically and powerfully in the story of Jonah. The clearest of scriptural calls are to justice, hospitality, and mercy. If dreamers and children don't qualify as recipients of these, I don't know who does.

The third chapter of Jonah speaks to human nature as well as to God's character. Jonah offers an at most half-hearted word about repentance. The people listen and actually repent, putting on sackcloth. You really need to read that part. It's just fun. Even the animals are covered in sackcloth as a sign of the widespread national repentance effort in Assyria. They all turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hearts.

And here's the clincher. They ask, "Who knows! God may relent and change God's mind; God may turn from fierce anger, so that we do not perish." (3:9)

Isn't that juicy? Who knows what God will do? God is a radically free agent unbound by human theological desires or political expectations. And by the way, God revealed that a long time ago. This story about the fundamentally gracious nature of God is, after all, right there in the Old Testament, likely written in the sixth century B.C.

We also get to hear about religiously astute non-Hebrews. We get to see people who don't have Jonah's religious training or ability to hear from God, and yet, they respond with prayers and repentance. I love this stuff!

Jonah's supposed religiously-informed hatred is overcome by the dramatic work of God. He proclaims the message, likely in a weak voice and only once in a back alley of Nineveh. But someone overhears. The message spreads. The president—oh, sorry, the king—gets wind of it and is convicted too. And an entire nation repents.

I think we could use some of that in our time. Our nation is overdue for a good dose of that repentance. And I am struck, as I so often am, by the timely nature of this teaching from scripture today.

And, of course, when that ancient accursed nation of Assyria repents, Jonah is happy. Okay, are you listening? I said he was happy. Is that right?

No, in the face of a people who repent of their evil and turn towards God, Jonah isn't happy. He is beside himself. He's livid. His response is as unrighteous as his anger.

Here's the understatement of chapter 4, verse 1: "But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry." And despite himself, his angry outburst to God sparks that beautiful confession I noted earlier about God's grace, mercy, steadfast love, and forgiveness. Here it is again: The Lord is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Yet still, Jonah wants to die. For he would rather die than see mercy for those wretched scum-of-the-earth Assyrians.

How can we hear this story and not think of current events. It is disgusting that the hateful Jonahs of the world seem to be getting the upper hand. Something's fishy, and something's rotten. Indeed, something stinks. And there is a profound need for censure and repentance and a radical turn away from racism and jingoism and all kinds of sinfulness back to righteousness and truth and God.

And so, may God have us all swallowed by great fish—metaphorically speaking, of course. And may we be—how shall I put this delicately—and may we all be burped up on the courthouse square here in Bloomington as were many yesterday. Did you see our own 10-year-old Molly Wyatt offering her testimony there yesterday! Good for her. And beyond Bloomington, may we all be burped up on the steps of the Capitol Buildings in Indianapolis and Washington, and on the lawn of the White House, bearing the message of Jonah, by way of Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as Jesus in Mark: “Time’s Up! The day has come for changing things and declaring ourselves. Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. And racism matters. Truth matters. Righteousness matters. The kingdom of God has come near. So speak up. So, act up. Repent, and believe in the good news.”

Or, in the pithy words of that Bloomington United sign that makes widespread appearance when hate speech and action arise among us: “Hate Has No Home in Our Town.” Or in our state. Or in our nation. Or in our hearts. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.