

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany  
January 24, 2021

Sisters and brothers, grace to you and peace from our Great Reconciler, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Wednesday afternoon the strands of this sermon began to come together. They had been tangled and woven in my mind with all of the events of the last three Wednesdays – insurrection, impeachment, inauguration. I prayed about what the gospel demands of me in the pulpit in times like these. How to go about tying the threads from the readings for today into the story of our own lives. For this is the work of the Holy Spirit as it binds us in its tether, anchoring us to God, even amid the tumultuousness of this world in which we live. That threatens too often to snap those bonds of our faith by fear and deception. Convincing us that what hope and values we cling to as Christians are vain and empty.

The abhorrent events of January 6<sup>th</sup> are still vivid in our minds. We have seen some terrible things the last few weeks that have made us uneasy about the future of our peaceful democracy. People acting in ways that threaten the fabric of our nation. Leaving in shreds the values we say we hold sacred. A significant number of people in our country are disappointed about the new administration and makeup of Congress. And I have heard a number of people express pain and hurt because they are at odds with relatives and friends over political views. So, I was thinking a lot about divides and what it takes to cross them. About how far humanity can stray from the truth of God's promise to draw all of us together into unity in Christ. Because when we think about the current state of our Union, some of the first descriptive words that come to mind are "partisan" and "divided." I listened to

President Biden's inaugural address and his emphasis on unity, wondering whether it would ever be possible. Crossing the aisle as political shorthand for "working together," seems like a quixotic vision. The chasms between us seem just too wide to bridge.

The prophet Jonah is an interesting human specimen, called into service by God. Though a relatively short text, the Book of Jonah is full of humorous and revealing stories about the life of a prophet. Highlighting the lengths to which we will go to avoid answering God's call. Letting our human desires and inclinations get in the way of doing what we know God wants us to do. Jonah was told to go to Nineveh and offer a warning about God's coming wrath. He famously tries to run from this call, eventually ending up in the belly of a whale. In the passage for today, Jonah has done all the running away from God's call that he can. And the next time God tells him to go, he figures he had better respond with a "yes." Now Nineveh was a wicked place by God's own accounting. The divide between them and God's purpose was widening day by day. Jonah was told to go and tell them that they have a little over a month to get their "you-know-what" together or else they would be destroyed.

What struck me in a new way reading this passage was the description of Nineveh as an "exceedingly large city – a three-days' walk across." Jonah goes just about a third of the way across before beginning to share the message God gave him. The amazingly unexpected thing is that almost immediately the large city, filled presumably with thousands of people, followed the lead of the king, and listened to Jonah! They all heeded the possibility of turning away from their actions that were drawing them further from God. They declared a fast. They dressed in the fabric of mourning. Even the smallest children and the animals put on sackcloth! They

called on God's mercy and hoped against hope that things could be different. That if they "turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may relent and change [God's] mind; [God] may turn from fierce anger, so that we do not perish." And that is exactly what God did.

It made me wonder about the possibility for restoration of relationship, even with those whose beliefs and actions we cannot understand. Not that we simply forgive and forget without consequences and accountability. But I'm wondering about something much bigger than us and our hurts. It is about that unity in Christ promised by God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

You see, all of us are far from God when we make enemies of those whose pain and brokenness we cannot...or rather will not...seek to understand. Who we would rather label the other as "wicked" or evil instead of distinguishing the actions from the person, who is made in the image of God. When we justify ourselves over and against them as if we don't have our own "you-know-what" to deal with. In Jonah's story as in ours, God is the one whose job it is to judge. And God is the one who is the architect of the kingdom come near. A kingdom where mercy and reconciliation are favored over judgment and destruction.

After such a successful proclamation we would assume Jonah celebrated this triumph. That the people of Nineveh turned so dramatically back toward God that they were spared. God's mercy prevailed. But his humanity was too great and too weak. He gave into a desire for vengeance and to see wicked people punished. Though the passage for today ends with his success, the next chapter begins with his failure. He rails at God for not punishing, even justifying his own reluctance to

listen to God's call. Pouting and spewing prayers that in hindsight he would wish he never said. Basically, he tells God straight out that he knew God would do this – be forgiving and loving to the people. Which is why he ran away from doing God's work in the first place.

Oh, how deeply we can identify with Jonah, who relished being the one to point out the wickedness in others, but could not see his own faults!

What I can't get out of my mind is this wondering: What if we were willing to go even a third of the way across the divides in our own lives? We all know someone who disagrees with us politically. Or from whom we are separated by past hurts, real or perceived. Sometimes God calls us to do the more challenging thing. Even making the first step toward a sister or brother we find irredeemable.

Those first disciples eagerly left their nets to follow Jesus. At least the first third of the way or so. It was when things got really tense and scary that they foundered and ran from this call. Leaving Jesus to face the cross on his own. God's merciful act for the redemption and reconciliation of us to God and to one another.

Ultimately disciples cannot do it. It is God's work on our behalf.

But we are not without potential and possibility because God in Christ has done the most difficult part -- Saving us from ourselves.

I wish I had the time and could do justice to reading the entirety of Amanda Gorman's poem written and recited for the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. But I want to share a part of it. The whole poem speaks of a recognition of imperfection, even as we strive toward a higher value of and hope for our unity.

This is from Gorman's poem, "The Hill We Climb"

*We lay down our arms  
so we can reach out our arms  
to one another  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all  
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:  
That even as we grieved, we grew  
That even as we hurt, we hoped  
That even as we tired, we tried  
That we'll forever be tied together, victorious  
Not because we will never again know defeat  
but because we will never again sow division  
Scripture tells us to envision  
that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree  
And no one shall make them afraid  
If we're to live up to our own time  
Then victory won't lie in the blade  
But in all the bridges we've made  
That is the promise to glade  
The hill we climb  
If only we dare...*

As Christians we trust that God can and will bring us closer to the fullness of union with Christ and one another. This is what it means to trust in the truth that the kingdom of God has come near. To turn back toward God and believe in the good news that reconciliation is possible. In the meantime, while we wait for its fulfillment, will we heed God's call and take the first steps across the divides?