

And Then You
(prayer by Walter Brueggemann)

We arrange our lives as best we can, to keep your holiness at bay, with our pieties, our doctrines, our liturgies, our moralities, our secret ideologies, safe, virtuous, settled. And then you---you and your dreams, you and your visions, you and your purposes, you and your commands, you and our neighbors. We find your holiness not at bay, but probing, pervading, insisting, demanding. And we yield, sometimes gladly, sometimes resentfully, sometimes late . . . or soon. We yield because you, beyond us, are our God. We are your creatures met by your holiness, by our holiness made our true selves. And we yield. Amen.

Jonah 3: Jonah Goes to Nineveh

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them from the greatest to the least, put on sack cloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

"Jonah's Confession"

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." One aspect of Jonah's belief in God was that God calls God's people into prophetic ministry. In Jonah's case, it was the job of preaching against the evil doings in the city of Nineveh. But, not liking the job opportunity, Jonah ran away towards Tarshish instead and ended up inside a great fish for three days and three nights. Having no doubt that it was the Lord Almighty who had put him there, he prayed, hoping that God was also a God of second chances.

"From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said:
In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.
From the depth of the grave I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.
You hurled me into the deep,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
I said, 'I have been banished from your sight;
yet I will look again toward your holy temple.
The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.
To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God.
When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you,
Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.
Those who cling to worthless idols
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.
But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation comes from the Lord.

Jonah 1-2 (adapted)

Jonah was grateful beyond measure. Grateful that the compassionate God of Israel heard his cry for help. Grateful that his God Almighty chose to save him from death even in his disobedience. Grateful that his merciful God accepted his

repentance. Grateful that his God of Loving kindness and goodness received his vow of obedience. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Praise God!

Making good on his vow, Jonah went to Nineveh and put the fear of Israel's God in them, saying: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed!" But when they believed and repented, Jonah was displeased and got angry. 'He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2c). In her reflection on Jonah's story, Will Gafney, associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School, wrote (Sojourners, p. 45):

"I knew it! I knew you were a God who was merciful and gracious to people I don't think deserve it—and I am furious with it and you. That's Jonah is a nutshell (4:2). Or rather his sermon. I read the book as a sermon with an over-the-top illustration not to be taken literally. I find Jonah to be an intentionally sulky comic character. The ridiculousness of Jonah highlights the absurdity of the claim that God does not care about the Ninevites or other non-Israelites. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, responsible for the decimation of Israel and destruction of the Northern Monarchy. The barbarity of the Assyrians included skinning people and carving out hunks of flesh while they were alive. Asserting God cares for Ninevites (even livestock, according Jonah 4:1) would have been a radical proclamation. It remains so for many in our time. Jonah's geographical context—today's Iraq and Syria—identifies peoples for whom many have felt enmity in recent years. They are also recipients of God's love, care, grace, and mercy: the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, al Qaeda, ISIS. Of them, as well, God asks: "And should I not be concerned about them and all the people and animals who live in their cities?" The answer now is what it was then: "Yes, of course." God cares for, reaches out to, accepts, and welcomes those we hold in enmity and those who harm us. If the book of Jonah is a

sermon, then its text is Exodus 34:6, where God identifies as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"—virtually identical to the text in Jonah 4:2c. These characteristics of God come to be known as the definitive Divine Attributes in Judaism. God's love is abundant, even to those we find to be unworthy of it."

If the sins of Nineveh were a thing of the past, then Jonah's confession about who God is and how God intervenes in human history by calling prophets to speak out against evil and violence, and trusting in this whale of a tale about the effectiveness of God's Word, and the Lord's loving care and concern for evil and violent humans beings, would be a no brainer. But, tragically, unholy and inhuman behavior among people has not ended. In last Tuesday's news we learned that after ARSA Rohingya fighters waged an August 26 attack against the Myanmar government, military troops and Buddhist militants upped the violence in their ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya stateless people who had been advocating for citizenship and freedom of movement Myanmar. When they entered Rohingya villages, troops killed the men, offered food to children then shot them, raped women, poured gas on them, and burned them alive, stomped the bellies on pregnant women, even on one woman who was giving birth. Of these ethnic cleansers, God asks us, "And should I not be concerned about them?" The answer now is what it was then: "Yes, of course."

Jonah's answer did not echo the "yes, of course" of God, so he got angry and sat under a tree to pout. But because God is good all the time, God let him in on the concern that lay heavy on the Holy One's heart. "Nineveh" God said, "has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left . . ." (4:11). In short they (and victims of evil and violence in every age) don't know about the God of Israel's love, offer of repentance, and way of caring for them. But my hope is this: Because of the food and aid relief work that some Bangladesh Muslims and others are giving to the thousands of refugee Rohingya souls fleeing into Bangladesh, God's 'yes, of course concern' will sound a little less like fake news to them.