

Sermon-April 11, 2021  
Jonah 3:1-4, 10  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31  
Mark 1: 14-20

We have a funny pattern of behavior in our household that Raul and I have noticed over the past few years. As you may know, I have two daughters: Inez, who is now 7 years old, and Lucia, who is now 5. They love to play with each other, and they almost always get along. Even after over a year of nearly constant quarantine in a small apartment here in Mexico City, where we live, they rarely ever fight and are now closer than ever. Those of you who remember Inez, will remember that she was an active and high energy toddler-and she and her sister still are. And although sometimes they drive me crazy with their endless needs, insatiable energy and constant noise, I have to admit that they are pretty well behaved. Lucia is the charming, cuddly baby of the family and Inez is a model oldest child, very mature and a good helper. However, they do have one pattern of behavior that I find fascinating. Whenever one of them gets in trouble or is having a temper tantrum, the other transforms into the perfect, most angelic child. You can hear their voice sweeten, and they immediately become obedient, affectionate and doting, as they revel in their momentary status as the golden child. Most of this behavior is directed at me or at my husband Raul-look at me, they say with their actions and their attitudes, it's me who is the best child, me who is the most good. That in itself is not so strange, but what does surprise me is how much they seem to enjoy, even savor, the suffering of the other. Not only is it-look at me, I am good by my own merits, but it is also: look at me, look how good and favored I am relative to my sister who, in her state of distress, exhaustion or hunger, is of course not being her best self. I don't want to project anything sinister on

them-I don't think it's unusual at all; rather, I see it as an unadulterated, unfiltered reaction to the punishment and of others relative to one's current state. Sometimes, it just feels so good when someone else gets what they deserve, when they suffer the consequences of their actions, and we, in contrast, are affirmed for our goodness and rightness.

It was this family phenomenon that came to mind when I reread the story of Jonah the reluctant prophet recently. Jonah, who runs away when God asks him to go to the city of Nineveh to call on them to repent. Jonah, who would rather be thrown into the stormy ocean and be swallowed by a whale than go do what God asks him to do. Jonah, who gets angry, rather than relieved, when the city of Nineveh changes its wicked ways, repents, and is saved by God. Jonah, who admits that he ran away from his call to prophesize to Nineveh because he KNEW that God would be merciful and forgiving. It's hard to know what motivated Jonah's response to Nineveh. Why did he prefer that they suffer for their actions rather than being saved? Was Jonah prideful? Exhausted? Vengeful? Bitter? Was he jealous? Why did he cling to the idea that the Ninevites were beyond the grace of God? Perhaps he was all too familiar with Nineveh, I'm not sure. Perhaps he had seen firsthand their behavior, the way they mistreated each other. Perhaps he wanted to see them suffer the consequences of their actions and in observing their pain be affirmed in his own goodness by comparison. That is not clear. What is clear, however, is that Jonah's image of justice is quite different from what God imagined. Whatever Jonah saw in Nineveh is not what God saw. While Jonah saw only the sum of their past actions, God saw the possibility of a different future for Nineveh. God allowed Nineveh to live into a future unburdened by their wicked past. A future in which they would repent, turn away from their wrongdoing, and be

transformed into someone new. Nineveh wasn't a lost cause because nothing in this world is beyond God's reach, God's grace, and God's possibility. "What good can come of Ninevah" Jonah scoffed. It turns out, a lot of good can come of Ninevah- a place Jonah deemed irredeemable. What is refreshing about this story is how quickly the Ninevites change their ways. Once Jonah calls on them to repent, they do so immediately and wholeheartedly. There is an urgency to their response which continues to surprise me, and certainly must have surprised Jonah. They respond eagerly to Jonah's proclamation, as if they were just waiting to be invited to change.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news," Jesus proclaims in Galilee. In our text from Mark, we also witness an urgent invitation. Jesus, beginning his ministry, calls for repentance, and then immediately begins inviting his disciples, many of whom are fisherman, to drop their nets and follow him, becoming fishers of men. This invitation comes within the first chapter of the book of Mark. There is a clarity and a succinctness to Mark-the book practically begins with Jesus' ministry, jumping past the birth story and getting straight to the point of Jesus' incarnation-his mission. In fact, the urgency of Jesus' message is central to Mark-the word "immediately" is used over 40 times throughout the book. *"The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness," "Immediately the disciples left their nets and followed him," "Immediately, Jesus called them," "Immediately, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught," "Immediately the leprosy left him."* And these phrases are just from the very first chapter of Mark. There is no time to hesitate, or nurse one's pride or jealousy like Jonah does. No smugness in our goodness, like my daughters. Jesus and his disciples get straight to

work, inviting everyone to repent and believe in the good news. For me, this urgency and efficiency is refreshing-it's an invitation to live a new life, Jesus is forward facing, looking towards the future, rather than dwelling in the past. Jesus immediately understands his mission, and this clarity is followed by gathering disciples, then by teaching, which results in the healing and transformation of the community. Jesus was a powerful and efficient community organizer, whose actions led to the transformation of individuals, communities, and the world.

Throughout the Bible, we see that nothing is a lost cause for God-no matter how wicked, how sinful, how harmful and misguided we are, God does not lose hope for us. God invites us to a new vision of who we can be-not limited to who we have been in the past. Right now, there is also an urgency in how we respond to God's invitation to grace, possibility and new life. Will we say yes to the opportunity when it arises, surely at a moment we were least expecting it? Will we embrace the way God sees us, full of possibility and potential, rather than being defined by our limitations and fears? 1 Corinthians invites us to hold lightly to our current status, our possessions, even our relationships, reminding us that the present form of this world is passing away to something still yet unknown, unseen, inexperienced, but much greater than the reality in which we live.

For me, as a US citizen, I admit that I have been tempted by the power of despair over the past few years. As my country embraced policies that separated immigrant children from their families, mistreated people because of their religion, legalized discrimination against people for their sexuality and gender identity and refused to admit that police brutality and white supremacy are a problem, I must admit that I have felt like Jonah as he yearned to see Ninevah suffer. Let us be humbled for our arrogant

pride, I wished. Let us feel the consequences of our inhumanity and let us suffer as a country. I yearned for a reckoning-to see consequences for our belief that, even in spite of the evidence of our wickedness, we continued to proclaim not only that we are exceptional, but that we are also blessed by God in all we do. I wanted to go to the top of that hill, much like Jonah, and wait to witness the indictment of a country that sometimes I believe is beyond redemption, a lost cause. This desire to savor the deliciousness of justice, perhaps a fate that is sometimes very well deserved, is tempting, and it's just so human. And perhaps we have gotten closer to this divine justice than we have in a long time- as our democracy teetered on the brink and things spiraled dangerously out of control in early January as people stormed the Capitol building. But people, communities, even countries are not beyond God's reach, grace, and possibility either. From Nineveh to Galilee and from Canada to the United States, God invites us to repent and live a new life. Luckily, I was reminded that no individual, no people, no country, is a lost cause, even as much as I sometimes want them to be. For me, the words that drew me back in, invited me again to consider the path of healing, repentance, and transformation were the words of the poet, Amanda Gorman, the 22-year-old poet laureate who spoke at the inauguration at the end of January. Her words spoke hard truths, but with a gracious invitation to live into our better selves.

And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know, to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.

We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be:  
A country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free.  
We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we  
know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens.

But one thing is certain:

If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our  
legacy and change, our children's birthright.

When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid.

The new dawn blooms as we free it.

For there is always light,

if only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it.

That urgency, with which Jesus called the communities he met to  
repentance, is still as relevant as ever. The time for action is now, even  
from within lockdown, and quarantine across the country and across the  
world. It will take compassion, creativity, imagination, patience, and a spirit  
of hope and possibility. Because the needs of the world are greater than  
ever today than they were a year ago-amidst a global pandemic, amidst  
growing inequality across the world, continued massive unemployment,  
amidst a landscape of gender violence and racism, as we see unequal  
vaccine distribution and as we feel our restlessness, and growing fatigue to  
quickly return to our old lives and ways, and so much more. Over the past

year, we have witnessed incredible suffering, grief, injustice, and sadness. What good can come of Ninevah? Jonah asked, believing that nothing was the answer. And what good can come of us, of this world, this day amidst such a landscape of despair and uncertainty? It turns out that for us, as was the case for Ninevah, our past does not dictate the future. As we were reminded last Easter Sunday, death does not have the last word. We are a people who believe, against all odds, in the God of resurrection. The God who transforms death into life. God invites us to prepare for, to be a part of building, a future that can be much brighter than our past. Not in spite of all we have endured and suffered, but perhaps more so because of it. Let us recognize the invitations to get to work, heard all around us, from the words of Scripture as well as poets and activists and modern-day prophets in our midst. So let us leave behind the ways of Jonah, who wanted justice to be served those who he believed deserved it because of their pasts, and let us embrace the forward facing invitation of Amanda Gorman in her inaugural poem- let us be brave enough to see the light, not only in ourselves, but within others. And let us get to work on being that light-right here and right now. Amen.