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Angry Enough

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Within our lifetimes, especially the last generation, our world has become increasingly angry. Weekly there are reports of Black men and women being shot. Riots night after night against our Police and Courts. In the last year, we have buried John McCain, Elijah Cummings and John Lewis, one called “Conscience of the Senate”, one who was “the Chaplain of the Congress”, and also one who was our own State’s “Voice of Cooperation”. I sometimes wonder if what we want is God’s Anger? We hardly recognize, let alone appreciate that we live with every possible convenience our ancestors imagined Buck Rogers having in the 21st Century. Democrats and Republicans cannot even speak peaceably, some wearing masks to keep their germs to themselves, others insulted to be asked to do so. It appears our very definition of Success is no longer about our lifestyle or contentment, sufficiency, but only comparison to the other-guy. Conflict Resolution says that “Conflict at its most basic levels is Healthy!” We disagree, no harm, no foul. Or as a Teacher or Preacher: “I challenge you to be better to work harder than we would do if not.” But there comes a point in Conflict, where the disagreement shifts to Competition of who Wins while everyone else loses. Conflict becomes dangerous, when one seeks to win so much, as to be willing to hurt, or embarrass the other. As a Society, we have reached the time, where there is no willingness to listen, only to destroy and discredit the other so that no one will question power ever again. Jesus was asked by the Scribes and Pharisees for a Sign to prove the Messiah’s coming. He responded “You see the sun and know what is coming, but cannot read the signs of the times? No sign will I give this generation, but the sign of Jonah.” With unquenchable fires in California, Washington and Oregon, the sun has appeared sick, ashen gray, against a muddy brown sky. For the first time in history there are multiple simultaneous tropical storms in the Gulf. With that as our horizon, what do we believe is coming for us?

Jesus told the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. A Landowner goes to the marketplace to hire day-laborers, agreeing to pay them each a day’s wage for going into the vineyard. Three hours later, the landowner does so again. Three hours later, when the day is already half-spent he does so a third time. At the 3rd hour of the afternoon, the Landowner finds other workers in the Marketplace, and does not chastise them for being lazy or irresponsible but sends them into the vineyard promising to pay what is fair. Even at the last hour of the day, the Landowner finds still other unproductive laborers and sends them into the Vineyard to labor. So the point of this Parable is there is work for everyone in the Vineyard! HOWEVER, At this point the Parable shifts focus to Laborers. As each receives a Day’s Wage for having Labored, whether one Hour or twelve, they find fault that others receive exactly what they earned. The response of the Landowner is “Do you begrudge me my generosity, doing what I will with what is my own?” Clearly, the parable does not account for the day after this, when no one would show up at the marketplace until the 11th hour! But that is to follow the argument of the laborers, not the Landowner, and this parable began with The Landowner as the focus who is less concerned about the cost per hour, than finding labor for the Laborers, and satisfaction from going into the Landowner’s vineyard to Labor. Are we thankful to be alive? Thankful for the joys of finding companions to share our life and love? Are we thankful for health and freedoms, and the opportunities of our lives, or are we blinded by how little we have compared to others, when we do have enough? Last Sunday we named forgiveness of our sisters and brothers. Do we believe those who wounded us, are worthy of being forgiven?

That is Jonah's issue. Jonah is a Prophet of Israel, given a Call by the Word of God. However, rather than prophesying to Israel, this Word from God is a Call to prophesy to Israel's enemy: Assyria. Imagine the Nazis, Saddam Hussein and Osama ben Laden... The Assyrians had not only attacked Israel in war, they destroyed Israel, socially, in military and economy for generations. Assyria killed their sons, raped their daughters, carried off the northern 10 Tribes of Israel as Prisoners of War, Salted the fields against growing crops; leaving behind Samaritan Orphans who were no longer purely Israelite nor Assyrian. Jonah is told by God, to go to this Ninevah, Capital City of Assyria, to preach that the Assyrians repent and be forgiven, or else endure God's wrath. And Jonah questions WHY should they be forgiven by Israel's God?

Ernest Hemmingway authored a short story titled "Dogs and Doves." I share this because the name "Jonah" translates as "The Dove." Hemmingway described that as humans we have a natural fear of wolves and wild dogs as predators and carnivorous. But when in a dog-fight, one wolf dominates the other, the weaker will bare the jugular vein of their neck, as much as to say "I apologize, You win, Go ahead, kill me." At which the Dominant Wolf instinctively will relinquish, and allow the wounded to go free. Doves however, when they fight will not ever relinquish but continue to peck at one another even after dead.

Jonah's anxiety is that he knows: the one thing Israel possesses is relationship with God, and God is loving, gracious, forgiving. BUT Jonah does not want Ninevah forgiven! The Book of Jonah is the tale of one man's journey of lament and depression. The Book of Jonah has a good deal of humor, if we look for it. Like Moses in the Book of Exodus, Jonah has a Divine Bush. There is a tension between God not behaving as Jonah wants, and Jonah not behaving as God wants. God tells Jonah to go East, to go up to Ninevah; so instead he goes West. Jonah goes down to the Harbor, down onto the Docks, down into the hold of the Ship, pulling the blankets up over his head, Jonah goes to sleep, hiding as far away from God as he could. But you cannot escape God, and we cannot escape our depressions. A horrible storm surrounds the ship, until it is ready to be sunk. Now, Sailors were not known for their devout faith and reverence to God. SO these Sailors throw dice to determine who has brought this storm upon them, and Jonah confesses asking to be thrown overboard. In the water, he is swallowed by a giant fish, and taken down, deeper and deeper, to the bowels of the Earth, a 3 day journey.

Inside this stinking Fish, having wallowed in self-pity 3 Days, at the bottom of the Oceans of the Earth, God has taken Jonah exactly where Jonah wanted to go, and there Jonah relinquishes. Jonah does not REPENT, Jonah's Will is not to forgive, not even to give a chance to the Ninevites. But in prayer to God, Jonah does accept that God is God, and he can only do what God commands. Instantly the fish is transported to the surface, and the fish vomits Jonah up, in of all places, on the very shore of Ninevah.

Here, once again, the focus of the story shifts. Jonah does not prophesy as commanded by God, that IF ASSYRIA DOES NOT CHANGE then GOD WILL PUNISH THEM, instead JONAH says that in 3 DAYS GOD WILL DESTROY NINEVAH. Where Ninevah was so large it would take 3 days to walk around, Jonah simply walks 3 hours into the middle of the City and back out. But the lesson every preacher learns is people do not necessarily hear the sermon as the preacher preached! All of Ninevah, from the King to the poorest of the poor does hear and does repent, not only do they wear sackcloth and ashes and pray to God, they dress their donkeys and oxen in Sackcloth and ashes! AND True to Form, God Sees and Hears, and God forgives.

With Ninevah and God both having repented from their prior courses, the story shifts back to Jonah, who sits down outside the City to watch and see what God will do. In a single day, God causes a bush to grow up, offering shade to Jonah; then a worm comes and eats the tree killing it. Now Jonah becomes irate! AND God in turn questions Jonah, "You grieve for an inanimate Tree, that you neither planted nor

watered, and enjoyed having for less than 24 hours; but you are angry that the people of Ninevah repented from their sin, and God repented from God's anger and forgave them?" And God asks us, "Do you do well to be angry?" To which Jonah replies, "YES, Angry Enough to Die!"

And Jesus reply to the Scribes and Pharisees was "I give you no sign, except the sign of Jonah."