

As Christians we know that the heart of the Gospel Message is GRACE & FORGIVENESS. Ever since Moses gave the people the Book of Leviticus, Judaism has practiced an Annual Observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As with all Beliefs and Laws, the difficulty comes in Application, taking our Sunday School lessons and applying them to the most painful circumstances in our own lives. The issue is that as Christians we each desire to be forgiven and receive The LORD's Supper, but we struggle with serving others or being served by others who hurt us, we question whether they are worthy.

We remember the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust;

We know also that almost 600 years before Jesus's birth, Babylon conquered Judah, Exiling them 70 yrs. The setting of JONAH comes from a time after King David and before Babylonian, when for over 100 years the Nation of Israel had been attacked over and over by Assyria. The northern 10 tribes of Israel were made to vanish from the face of the earth, and the remnant Southern kingdom of Judah made a vassal slave-state. Assyria's Capital was Ninevah.

The story of Jonah is a fable of hyperbole, where every detail is taken to extremes. Ordinarily, we think of Prophets being like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel prophesying to the people of Israel; we think of Nathan who spoke to King David and Elijah challenging King Ahab. Here GOD instructs Jonah to go to the Assyrian Capital Ninevah; this would be like Vladimir Zelenskyy the President of Ukraine being told to go to President Putin at Red Square's Kremlin in Russia offering to them REPENTANCE & REDEMPTION!

The part of Jonah everyone remembers is that Jonah went down to the Sea, to go south instead of North, Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish. After 3 days of going ever downward to the bowels of the earth, Jonah finally prays to GOD that he be forgiven. Instantly the great fish is transported to the shores of Ninevah, and Jonah is vomited up exactly where GOD wanted him to be!

BUT instead of giving the Prophecy GOD directed "that Ninevah REPENT or face PUNISHMENT", Jonah prophesied that they have No Hope, they have 3 days before they will be destroyed.

The true MIRACLE of this story is that even hearing the wrong sermon Ninevah does repent! Every person wears sackcloth and ashes and prays, even animals are made to wear sackcloth and ashes! TRUE to the Word of GOD, GOD repents from destroying Assyria and allows Ninevah to live. At which, Jonah is outraged! This is not what he wants. "This is why I did not want to come to Ninevah in the first place! I knew GOD to be a GOD of forgiveness. I want Assyria punished for what they have done to Israel!"

At which this little vignette is inserted into the story, that Jonah is watching/ waiting for GOD to do what Jonah wants. And God appoints a plant to grow up overnight, to provide Jonah shade. Then a caterpillar comes and does what caterpillars do, eating the plant, which dies. Tipping Jonah over the edge.

And GOD asks Jonah, "This plant, which you neither planted nor nurtured, served as food for the worm; yet you have greater empathy for the plant than you do for all the people and animals of Assyria?"

GRACE & FORGIVENESS!

Our second reading this morning also comes from our Old Testament/the Hebrew Scriptures, throughout this last summer we followed the story of Genesis, with GOD attempting GOD's PURPOSES through Adam & Eve, then Noah, then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I reflected with a family this week, how often in business and history Legacies have been built over a 1st and 2nd generation, Abraham, Isaac passed along to a 3rd, Jacob; when in the 4th generation (JOSEPH) the world has shifted and the family is no longer able to carry-on what was established.

When last we read Genesis, JOSEPH was the eldest son of the favorite wife Rachel, and the 9th son of Jacob who was renamed ISRAEL. Joseph had been thrown into a pit by his brothers, then sold to Ishmaelites going to Egypt, his Coat of many colors torn up as if by a beast, their Father ISRAEL told his son was dead.

In Egypt, Joseph went from Slavery to Prison, where he became an interpreter of dreams. Eventually, Joseph interprets the dreams of Pharaoh, saving Egypt from the devastation of 7 years without rain, and Joseph becomes Governor of All Egypt under Pharaoh. In that time of famine, Joseph saves Israel and the sons of Israel, bringing them all to live in the Egyptian region of Goshen. Then Israel (Jacob) died. The brothers were haunted by what they had previously done to Joseph, throwing him into a pit, selling him into slavery, telling their father he was dead. They wrote instructions to Joseph, as if from their father, instructing Joseph to forgive the sins of his brothers, to forgive all the wrongs they had done to him. HOWEVER, just because the guilty believe they should be punished, does not mean that the other had plotted to weaponize against them.

This week someone came to me asking "Who Judges our Judges?" and whether we have gotten our "Judicial System Wrong?" I am not in the place of those who asked the question, so responded "Biblically, GOD our CREATOR is also to be our JUDGE," and "YES, without getting into politics, our Judicial system is twisted by a human need, JONAH's DESIRE, the BROTHERS' FEAR for RETRIBUTION & PUNISHMENT. Instead the Bible focuses on FINDING THE LOST, celebrating at REDEMPTION." GRACE & FORGIVENESS!

I ran a quick search through the Bible, because Joseph's reaction comes in sharp contrast to his brothers, who had instructed Joseph to forgive all the wrongs they had done, "JOSEPH WEPT."

When King David's child by Bathsheba was terminally ill, DAVID FASTED, WEPT & PRAYED until the point of the child's death, David dried his tears, describing that when he could make a difference David WEPT. When David's Son Absalom had led an army against his father dividing the Nation in Civil War, David wept. When Lazarus died, JESUS WEPT.

While the Roman understanding of HELL is as a place of Punishment, the Jewish understanding had been that HELL is a place of our own Separation and Isolation, being Cut-Off from GOD, therefore a place of WEEPING & GNASHING OF TEETH.

Joseph Weeping is not a sign of weakness, Joseph Wept releasing everything pent up in his heart.

There is no Time-reference in this story, but we know that Joseph had been in prison for a long time before the CUP BEARER remembered Joseph to recommend to Pharaoh; and according to Pharaoh's dream there were then 7 years of abundance, followed by 7 years of famine; followed after that by the death of ISRAEL; so this scene is probably 20 years after the Brothers' Abuses. The gift of TIME, is not that we forget, not that we ever forget those who have suffered and died. The GIFT of TIME is the wisdom of recognition, of what has happened BECAUSE we had earlier experiences, losses, which when hip-deep in the moment would have made no sense. What Joseph states to his brothers are facts: "YOU INTENDED TO HARM ME, BUT GOD USED THIS FOR GOOD TO ACCOMPLISH WHAT HAS BEEN DONE, THE SAVING OF MANY LIVES." GRACE & FORGIVENESS.

Today represents the Anniversary of my 39th Year in the Pastoral Ministry. Our Church is 45 years old, having begun in 1978. Most of that has been wonderful, nearly all of it challenging, as there was no road map for Society or for the Church for all the social changes from 1984 to the present. 20 years before, who could have imagined 9/11? As a Pastor, I toured the Soviet Union, traveled to S. Sudan...

There were about 2 years of my 39, I am certain there were a few in our Church's history, which at the time we wished we could have done without, AND AT THE TIME THERE WAS BLAME, but without those experiences I would not have come to this Church, or for this Church to become who we now are, and the good work that GOD has accomplished throughout our 4 years together, in this Church and community and in my life as well. SO THANK YOU. Someone recently tried to name the GOOD that has come out of COVID, I am not certain we can recognize that yet, maybe in 20 years. GRACE & FORGIVENESS!