

Justice, Justice

Jonah 3:4–10

Luke 10:25–37

In our Thursday Bible Study group we have started a study of Paul's letter to the Romans which is an important yet difficult book. It inspired Luther to rebel against the Catholic church, and has spawned hundreds if not thousands of commentaries. It starts with a sweeping condemnation of all Gentiles rapidly followed by a sweeping condemnation of all Jews. The wrath of God is visited upon everyone. Only after we are thoroughly crushed does Paul start to talk about the other side of God's justice which is grace. Grace is our only hope given how wide of the mark we all are.

This is difficult reading for me, because I love to emphasize the grace and the unconditional love of God and ignore the other part of God's justice which is wrath. I personally prefer the love bit and most of us got too much of the wrath and guilt and eternal damnation part when we were growing up. But now we are grown-ups and we might/should pay a bit more attention to the wrath.

As best I understand Paul's argument, God is faithful to his covenant with Israel, a covenant which he has now extended to Gentiles, but we are notoriously unfaithful. And that's actually not ok. It's not ok before we enroll in the reign of God and its still not ok afterwards. Yes, God extends God's grace to us in loving forgiveness but that's not so we can go on happily sinning knowing the God still loves us. In fact Paul asks "What then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may abound?" and the answer to that would be "No".

The passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg this week is a time of great sadness for us as a country. She was a remarkable woman and a fearless campaigner for equality and social justice. And along the way she made friends not enemies. She has been and will continue to be an inspiration to many.

On the wall of her Supreme Court chamber RBG had a phrase from the book of Deuteronomy, "Justice, justice you shall pursue." (Deut 16:20) The complete verse is "Justice, justice you shall pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

God's justice is a combination of fierce displeasure and fierce love. As his children we get to emulate that. RBG embodied those qualities as she fought against the things that divide and oppress us and fought for the rights of women and hence the creation of the beloved community where all are equal and all are respected.

God's grace is not patient with injustice and a lack of integrity. God's wrath is invoked when we fail to keep the covenant but God's love always welcomes us back when we repent. And invites and encourages us to walk *with* God, not away from God.

And that was Jonah's message to the people of Nineveh. Like all the prophets he conflated political and natural disaster with the wrath of God. "Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" meant that in forty days God's wrath would be felt and the city would experience

disaster. And what did the people of Nineveh do? They believed him. They didn't just believe him, they took action. Led by their king, they put on sackcloth and sat in ashes and they fasted. And not just the people, but the livestock too. Even the animals were included in this great national act of repentance. The king's decree said "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

We are today in a time like Nineveh's.

How often have the prophets said, "Continue like this and great disaster will overcome the planet"? How often have we heard, "Forty years more and Earth will be overthrown."? We are heard the warnings – Jonah, Amos, Hosea have all called out to us – just a short time, just a few years before this cannot be stopped. But we have continued in our old ways.

There are prophets like RGB, and like Greta Thunburg, who have warned us and who have worked to change our ways, but there has been no king brave enough and wise enough to say, "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands, all shall repent and call to the Lord."

Paul makes it very clear in those first two crushing chapters of Romans that God's wrath is not just judgment on the last day but a daily reality. When the Gentiles turned away from God and chose to go their own ways Paul says that "God gave them up" – God gave them up to the craziness of their own minds. We should hear this as a corporate happening. It wasn't just individuals but the whole human culture as it turned away from God and God's ways, God allowed it to carry on towards destruction.

You know where I'm going with this.

Environmental destruction. Climate change. The Great Extinction.

We have failed to see that animals and plants are also our neighbors. We have failed to keep the covenant in which we were to tend and till the earth as stewards of it all. And God, in God's wrath, has let us go on in our wicked, self-centered ways until now the very planet is joining in our destructive efforts by sending up great clouds of methane where the permafrost is melting, and choking plumes of carbon from wildfires here and in Brazil and Siberia and in too many other places.

Destruction is here and now.

But.

Yes, there's a but, a very big but.

Jesus Christ.

In the midst of our destructive behavior, God came and lived among us. In the midst of our destructive behavior, God's grace took on flesh, clothed in carbon he breathed oxygen and exhaled carbon dioxide. Just like us he depended on the plants and other animals for his survival.

God made it clear that he is not somewhere in the distance watching us but is right here in the very fabric of the planet.

In the midst of our destructive behavior God holds out his hands in love upon the cross, taking upon himself all the “evil ways and violence that is in our hands” and joining in the suffering, not just of humanity, but of the whole universe. Christ is here, the suffering Christ is suffering with each creature, each forest and the transcendent Christ is calling us to a higher path.

Now, when we repent and turn to God, forsaking our violent ways, Jesus Christ stands between us and God’s wrath so that we see the loving and grace-filled side of God’s nature – the mercy and love extended to us, available to us in every moment. Because God has solved the problem. God has created the beloved community, the peaceable kingdom. God has already done it.

And there is our hope.

It’s easy to despair. There is much sadness. There is much fear.

Yet in the midst of it all, we are called to be the people of hope and of resurrection, the yeast that leavens the loaf. And we can do that by repenting of our failure to live up to our calling and by our determination to continue to change, to continue to take small and big steps to live into the New Covenant, the one sealed in Christ’s blood, where we walk together with God because we claim for ourselves and for our people and for our planet, the victory over sin and violence which is signified in Christ’s death and resurrection.

What happened to the people and livestock of Nineveh? We are told, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.” Are we too late? Will repentance now be enough?

God’s promises are true and firm. God’s promises will outlast the mountains.

We cannot see the future, but we know that God is still reconciling humanity to himself. We know that there have been very dark times in the past and God’s grace has brought us through. We know that God is faithful to the covenant. God’s nature has not changed. God is love.

God’s redeeming grace is still available to us just as it was to Nineveh. So let us repent. Let us accept our culpability, our failure to live up to the standards of justice for all, including the planet. Let us determine to live in newness of life, claiming for ourselves the freedom from the sin matrix that is available in Christ. And let us cast ourselves and our planet onto the mercy of God listening for our part, listening for how we are called to live, what we are called to do, how we are called to pray so that those words on RGB’s chamber wall may be engraved on our hearts and lived in our world:

“Justice, justice you shall pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

