

**“The Purpose of Politics”**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 4.1-4**  
**Andrew Connors**  
**3rd Sunday after Epiphany**  
**January 24, 2021**

Are you prepared to deal with the depth of God’s irresponsible generosity? God’s willingness to forgive the unforgivable person. The liar who God sees is more than the sum of their lies? The cheater who God sees as more than the sum of their cheating? The white nationalist who God sees as more than just the totality of their racism? Are you prepared to deal with the depth of God’s irresponsible generosity?

If the answer is no, then you are in good company. Part of the genius of this story is the distance it gives us to face this hardest of human living through a humorous story about the Assyrians, a people who, in the time this was written, weren’t as big and bad as they used to be. Those who heard the story of Jonah would have known that the Assyrians were the ones who first sacked Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, in 721 BCE. After the northern kingdom fell, the southern kingdom of Judah where Jerusalem is located had to pay oppressive tribute to the Assyrians to keep them from taking Jerusalem as well. The Assyrians were later taken out of commission by the expanding Babylonian empire. By the time the story of Jonah was written, the Assyrian threat would have been a distant memory, a story about an historical enemy, no longer an active threat, sort of like King George III is to us in Lin Manuel-Miranda’s *Hamilton*.

It’s easier to look at God’s irresponsible generosity from a distance. It’s much harder to examine it up close when your heart is racing just thinking about that one person, or group of people who’ve got it coming to them. Jonah says no, I’m not ready to deal with God’s irresponsible generosity; and I respect him for it. While everybody else who’s called into service is singing “Here I Am, Lord, is it I Lord?” Jonah’s like, I know what this means. I’m out. Find someone else. And we are all like that about somebody. The person who wronged you in your childhood. The one who betrayed you in your adulthood. The one who left you to clean up their messes on their deathbed. And more than a handful of you have told me sometime over the past four years, “I’m not praying for that man. I can’t even look at him.”

Anne Lamott says that earth is forgiveness school, that you might as well start at the kitchen table - that way you can do this work in comfortable pants.<sup>1</sup> But her words take a lot more unpacking since forgiveness is often confused with overlooking someone’s abusive behavior toward you or your country or your best friend. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, “Let Us Commence,” University of CA Berkeley, May, 2003, republished here - <https://www.salon.com/2003/06/06/commencement/>.

Jonah seems to argue that forgiveness - the deep kind - isn't really our work at all. It's God's initiative and God's work, often undertaken after someone has changed their ways. After a person has accepted responsibility for their part of a destructive relationship, after a political party has addressed the way they've contributed to sin and violence, after a nation has accepted its role for systems of oppression that continue to beget poverty and racism and division.

Jonah is not asked to go to an evil nation and accept their abuse. He's not asked to overlook their terrible ways. In fact he gets the privilege of announcing their destruction, which turns out to be his favorite part of the unwanted gig. Honestly, it's every prophet's favorite part. Moses gets to say, "Let my people go, or else." Elijah gets to rain down fire from heaven on the prophets of Baal who mocked him. Jesus gets to turn over the tables. Peter gets to say, "you withheld money from the Lord so now you're gonna drop dead." Every prophet loves to speak truth to power. To announce oppression will be ended, injustice stopped, to face the arrogance of tyrants and name their fall. But who is actually prepared for the change of heart and the change of ways? Who is actually open to God taking your enemy and turning her into your friend? Who is actually open, not just to the welcome end of injustice, but to the change of the enemy who perpetuated it?

No, the story *isn't so much about the need to forgive*, a lesson that can rightly ignite resentment in people whose oppressors have not yet stopped their oppression, much less apologized, or taken responsibility for it. It's more about *what happens when the person does change, when they do apologize, when they do take steps to get better*. It's about remembering that God's ultimate goal isn't just to stop the injustice of evildoers, though that's always required. God's goal is to win them over.

It's important to remember since the best kind of change comes from that kind of transformation. The former neo-Nazi whose conversion leads to the conversions of hundreds more like him. The recovering racist who becomes the teacher to others about the blinding lies of whiteness, the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps meritocrat jolted by a new disability who then sees firsthand the exclusion that is built into policies that do not respect difference. God's goal isn't just arresting injustice in a moment in time. It's a total conversion of the world.

I hope that as this trial of the former President unfolds in the next couple of weeks that we don't lose sight of this essential purpose of politics - of people working together for the common good. I hope that our desire to make that man pay for his sins, a desire that runs deep in many, doesn't harden our hearts for the compassionate work of justice that is the only thing that can lead us into a new space. I hope we can shift beyond a single strategy of resistance to hate that we have developed over the past four years, and into a more creative, productive, joy-filled space to address the many injustices that have gone unaddressed for the last fifty. I hope we can be as open to transformation and conversion as the people whose policies, or opinions we despise.

Dr. King argued for this power of love from the earliest parts of his ministry. And he also warned us against hate because of what it does to the hater. “You just begin hating somebody,” he preached, “and you will begin to do irrational things.”

“You can’t see straight when you hate. You can’t walk straight when you hate. You can’t stand upright. Your vision is distorted. There is nothing more tragic than to see an individual whose heart is filled with hate. He comes to the point that he becomes a pathological case. For the person who hates, you can stand up and see a person and that person can be beautiful, and you will call them ugly. For the person who hates, the beautiful becomes ugly and the ugly becomes beautiful. For the person who hates, the good becomes bad and the bad becomes good. For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That’s what hate does. You can’t see right. The symbol of objectivity is lost. Hate destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. King tried to teach us that our politics is a reflection of the quality of our soul. The two are inextricably linked. As we go after purveyors of injustice, we must not lose sight of the direction that God wants to take us - all of us - together. The equality of all souls that is already real for God, that we must work hard to make real for human beings.

Ann Lamott says it this way: “Everyone is screwed up, broken, clingy, and scared, even the people who seem to have it more or less together. They are much more like you than you would believe. So try not to compare your insides to their outsides. Also, you can’t save, fix or rescue any of them, or get any of them sober. But radical self-care is quantum, and radiates out into the atmosphere, like a little fresh air. It is a huge gift to the world. When people respond by saying, “Well, isn’t she full of herself,” smile obliquely, like Mona Lisa, and make both of you a nice cup of tea.”<sup>3</sup>

Which means, dear friends, that one of the best things we can do to lean into last week’s transition of power, is to pay attention to our insides, asking ourselves this hard question - Are you more committed to your enemy’s destruction than you are open to their conversion? Recalibrating our life together toward the alleviation of human suffering, the shared commitment to address the sins of our collective human history together in the moments that we are living, with a good hope for all. That doesn’t mean that we won’t have to fight tooth and nail to make it so. It just means we have to remember God’s ultimate goal in all that we do and fight accordingly, wisely, honestly, for good, not for vengeance.

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, November 17, 1957. Dr. King gave a similar version of this address to Howard University at around the same time.

<sup>3</sup> Lamott, “Let Us Commence.”

Amanda Gorman, the poet laureate whose poem, "The Hill We Climb," you simply must read and reflect on yourself, said it this way:

We lay down our arms  
so we can reach out our arms  
to one another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.  
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true,  
that even as we grieved, we grew,  
that even as we hurt, we hoped,  
that even as we tired, we tried,  
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious.  
Not because we will never again know defeat,  
but because we will never again sow division.  
Scripture tells us to envision  
that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree  
and no one shall make them afraid.  
If we're to live up to our own time,  
then victory won't lie in the blade.  
But in all the bridges we've made,  
that is the promise to glade,  
the hill we climb.  
If only we dare.  
It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit,  
it's the past we step into  
and how we repair it.<sup>4</sup>

Amen. It's a word that means, simply, "what she said." Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb," Poem given at the Inauguration of the 46th President of the United States, transcribed from this video in *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/books/amanda-gorman-inauguration-hill-we-climb.html>