**Low Point**

January 10, 2021

a [#sermon](https://nathanjhill.com/tag%3Asermon) from January 10, 2021

<https://nathanjhill.com/low-point-xtng>

Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irA4vTbDubI&feature=youtu.be>

at University Christian Church from Jonah 2:2-9

Dear church,

It is Sunday after another long and painful week in our country, another low point for our nation in a string of low points. What happened on Wednesday may still have us stunned – because we are so close to Washington DC and have walked and worked and advocated on those grounds before and because we saw in the image of a Confederate flag, in the anti-semitic symbols by white supremacist groups, in the racist conspiracy-fueled madness on display, a continuation of an American history that worships violence, that celebrates *us versus them*.

Whether we want to call it insurrection, sedition, or a violent mob, those kinds of images are deep-seated in American history.

This year, for example, marks the 100th anniversary of the massacre of the wealthy black community called Greenwood in Tulsa, OK, where violent white mobs gunned down black citizens and set fire to businesses and homes, with the help of the National Guard.

Sometimes, we are not told that history – including those of us who grew up in lily white school systems – but that trauma and that violent mob look very familiar to those who study American history and recognize such low points.

Wednesday reminded us of this refrain: America is capable of being something special, and we are capable of being something awful.

Like you, I am still sorting through it all, trying to hold my tongue and my tweets, trying to be careful in what I say and process the loss of life, including 42 year old Capitol Hill police officer, Brian Sicknick, same age as me, who was beaten to death by the mob, and recognize acts of courage and integrity all around.

And I am listening for God, seeking to craft a prayer that will capture how I feel.

Maybe you are too.

What does it mean to pray when we are at a low point, swallowed up in the depths of the deep brought on by violence, division, and injustice? What words can we choose when we are angry and afraid, when we are at risk to lose any hope?

In our scripture today, Jonah the prophet delivers a powerful prayer of repentance from a low point – quite imaginatively from the belly of a fish at the bottom of the churning, chaotic sea.

Can you imagine what it might have been like?

The smell. The damp. The cramped space.

Of course, the Book of Jonah is more like a parable than an actual scientific blow by blow.

In all likelihood, if any of us were swallowed by a fish while visiting Bethany Beach, we probably wouldn’t have much time to pray.

First, how did Jonah get there?

At the beginning of this prophetic and powerful account, God says to Jonah, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah refuses – he resists God’s call. He gets the first plane ticket – or boat ticket – and leaves town.

Later, we would discover why – Jonah hated the Ninevites.

He didn’t want them to experience grace or generosity from his God, because he knew if the people heard his call and responded, God would spare them destruction. Jonah believed that those stinking Ninevites were scum of the earth. They deserved destruction. They deserved an angry mob. He had read about all the bad things they did on Facebook and decided that these people were irredeemable.

But God wasn’t having it.

A storm hits the sea, and the sailors freak out. As a last ditch effort to save their lives, they toss Jonah overboard into the churning water.

And scripture says, “But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.”

You can understand that Jonah was miserable.

He says to God,

You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, “I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?” The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever

Jonah could have made one heck of a blues singer. His words echo with desperation, shame, sorrow, and loss. His life is practically over.

The irony of this situation was that he was in that fish because of his own choices. He made his own bed and now he was lying in it. By turning away from God’s call to share expansive grace to his enemies, Jonah was in the pits, literally. And now he longed just to go back to the temple, to sacrifice to God, to make things right.

I suggest then there are two ways to hear Jonah’s prayer.

First, we can read it as a genuine turning point in Jonah’s life. He is now in an unimaginable situation in the stinky, watery belly of a fish, deep and distant from the life he used to know. He knows he messed up. And he is ready to change, to be someone different, to pursue God’s way. His prayer wells deep from his heart, representing a U-turn, what we call repentance.

But there is another way to hear these words, because as Jonah’s story continues, we discover this prophet has work to do.

When Ninevah hears to Jonah’s message of judgment, the people of the city, to his surprise, make a U-turn. They grieve, pouring ashes on their heads and dressing in sackcloth. They change their behaviors, even the people at the top. They cut off the conspiracy-fueled social medial channels. They refuse to hate their neighbors, even ones they disagree with. They care for the immigrant, the poor, and the widow. They honor God and turn away from their wickedness.

But Jonah, when he sees this, goes off, pouts, and wishes he was dead. He is disappointed that his enemies received grace rather than judgment. He is distraught, when just moments before, he was talking about all holy he wanted to be in the temple.

So we must wonder – is Jonah saying the right things to get out of his situation without actually going through any transformation? Is this prayer authentic or empty?

Jesus had something to say about religious leaders like this in Matthew 23:27:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.”

Last week, hours after being evacuated and threatened by a raging mob, many of our leaders in the Senate and House took to their podiums and apparently found God. Their words and their tune changed with the world watching. All of a sudden, they spoke somberly about unity, coming together, and debate, when moments before some of them fundraised off of the riot.

Certainly, their words were needed to cool tensions.

Maybe their words reflected a real repentance and change in their hearts.

Or maybe in a few weeks, everything will go back to the way it was.

Jonah’s prayer in the belly of that fish gives us permission to speak to God in our low points.

To cry out. To lament.

To long for something different.

To seek repentance and return.

To speak to God when we are at our rock bottom.

And trust that God that hears us – whatever our rock bottom is right now.

But just like Jonah, we will be judged for whether our prayer means something.

Some of us, therefore, need to practice holding our tongues and let a few angry tweets/posts simmer for a bit before pressing post. Some of us need to be sure that our elected leaders are on speed dial. Some of us need to do a lot more listening to those who warned us that the threat of violence and destruction was real.

**Some of us simply need to hear the truth – not conspiracy theories – the truth, and understand that hearing the truth is an incredible act of love.**

But most importantly, we, as faithful Christians, must offer an alternative, however imperfect and messy it is than what we saw this week, a way that leads to abundant life and liberation from the sin and injustices of this world, a way that actively rejects racism and hatred, a way that seeks to hold one another accountable, a way that seeks to serve with humility and love, a way that ends the narrative of us versus them.

Or will our thoughts and prayers and Facebook posts end up being nothing more than hot air?

After Jonah finishes his prayer, the fish literally vomits Jonah up on to the beach.

Many churches this week are reflecting on the story of Jesus’ baptism, where he too was immersed in the chaotic raging water of the Jordan River and emerged with affirmation for his ministry to liberate God’s people.

When we are baptized, we too die to the fake narratives of sin and death and are vomited up to live into the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus.

Today, we are given another opportunity to show the world that our baptism means something.

God is vomiting us out after one more low point in our nation’s history.

Our call, like Jonah’s, continues.

In the words of St. Ignatius:

Pray as though everything depended on God; act as though everything depended on you.

Thanks be to God.