

Sermon for The Third Sunday after Epiphany
RCL Lectionary, Year B
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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Jonah and the Blue Screen
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While I was driving into San Francisco Thursday evening for a meeting at the Cathedral, on the car radio was Marketplace, now a mainstay in my daily media dose. It's my regular check-in with the hurricane that's presently our shared economy, which seems to get more and more personal with each passing week: Personnel restructuring here at the church. My brother-in-law in Japan being reduced to half-time at Mitsubishi. Numerous friends, parishioners, and neighbors straining at the edges and wondering whether they'll be next on the hit list.

On the Marketplace was a brief statement from Microsoft's CEO, Steve Ballmer. Many of you heard this past week that Microsoft, for the first time in its history, laid off employees. In a brief phone announcement about the lay-offs, Ballmer pronounced, with all the erudition of a prophet, that our economy wasn't simply in a recession, but was instead going through a "reset." You computer buffs might get the joke, but I had a mental image of the Divine staring into the classic Windows blue screen of death and hitting "Ctrl-Alt-Delete." In short, the world as we know it is coming to an end. Time to re-boot. Anything you were working on and wasn't saved may be lost. I don't know much about Steve Ballmer, but I frankly never imagined Bill Gates' successor making a statement that would evoke a theological image, but there it is!

All of our readings today have something to do with a "reset," a sort of cosmic re-boot.

First, we have Jonah proclaiming God's warning to the wealthy, self-satisfied, urbanized society of Ninevah – a place that risks resonance with our own. Then, we get Paul, who in addition to proclaiming that the appointed time has grown short, offers a line exhorting men to behave as though they had no wives. (I can almost hear the collective rolling of eyes of in the room.) Then there's Jesus, who has just lost his mentor, John the Baptist. Jesus takes up John's message, but knows he's next on the hit list and that the end of the world for him isn't all that far away at all.

I'll start with Paul, because beyond the difficult translation between a first-century patriarchal world-view and our own twenty centuries later is a deeper truth Paul conveys even to us about the contingency of all human life – relationship, ownership, business, sorrow, and joy. And that this contingency, which so many of us feel acutely right now in our present economic predicaments and challenges, is the raw material in our lives that demands grace. Our vulnerability is a window – if not a door – through which God can enter our hearts and remake us. Paul wants to impress on the Corinthians, and perhaps on us as well, that the first priority in life is not satisfying desire or establishing households or even planning for tomorrow, next week, or next year. The first and paramount priority is remembering that we belong to God.

Jonah is coming at this truth from another angle, and his story bears re-telling at this point, because we are much like Jonah these days. Most of you will know about Jonah, of course, in reference to a big fish or a whale. He is among the more amusing characters of Hebrew Scriptures, a sort of reluctant prophet who gets caught up in a divine comedy involving the great city of Ninevah. When God first sends Jonah there to call the people away from their sinful behavior, Jonah refuses by running away and going to sea. God, the story goes, sends a storm upon the ship, and Jonah is forced to admit the storm is his responsibility because he has disobeyed a divine command. And so the sailors toss him overboard, and a big fish comes and swallows him up. After

Jonah relents in the belly of the beast and praises God, the fish coughs him up on dry land, Jonah dusts himself off and goes to Ninevah as commanded. Then we come into today's passage, where Jonah proclaims God's warning, and the people of Ninevah – in one of the briefest and greatest surprises of scripture – actually listen to the prophet. They amend their ways – they hit their own reset button – and God withholds the wrath of the blue screen. If you read further this whole sequence of events infuriates Jonah, who is sorely disappointed at the anti-climactic ending to his adventures. Part of him, it seems, wanted to sit back and watch the great city be destroyed in fire and brimstone.

For us today, many of us are like Jonah at various points in the story. Some of us are like Jonah the reluctant prophet, running in denial of our calling to proclaim the truth the world so desperately needs to hear. Some of us feel like Jonah thrown overboard with our lost jobs or unraveling business ventures. Others are feeling profound shame about surviving on the ship at sea while watching co-workers, friends, and family members become the Jonahs as the economic crisis wheels through our shared lives. Yet others are angry like Jonah because God's wrath does not seem to be raining down on those whose greed and lack of prudent foresight created the mess to begin with. Bottom line question for Jonah is the same for all of us: Why isn't God showing up and doing what we expect God to do?

To come full circle in our scripture today, I return to our psalm: "For God alone my soul in silence waits." In the midst of all the spiritual cries of, "Why me?" or "Why us?" we are called to a profound silence like Jonah in the belly of the fish. Even as we fear we are lost in the deep waters of a world changing and changed forever, where the great reset button has been pushed somewhere, the hope we turn to is in the deep stillness of this moment, the profound place where our hearts continue to beat and a prayer becomes the summation of all our endeavors and ends. God meets us here.

"For God alone my soul in silence waits." For God alone. Our souls – whatever is about us that makes us essentially human, that immutable part of our being. . . they need only one thing alone, and that is the holy Other we call God.

At this point in our shared history and journey, we're sitting in the belly of the great fish of a floundering economy, and discovering as Jonah did in the silence what really matters in life: the call of God. And that call is asking us all over the place and in so many different ways, to grow up a little bit more. To see crisis as opportunity. To claim our suffering as a means to grace. To see our collective loneliness as a chance for community. To take up the mantle of prophecy and build something new with Christ. Something new that has everything to do with dignity and community rooted in the source of who we are, where we come from, and where we are ultimately headed.

Because when at last, in the words of today's psalm, we are truly able not to set our hearts on wealth, we find the freedom to become the loving creatures God has called us to be. And then we will be truly ready to share the good news without the grumbling of Jonah, and instead with an abundance of joy and discovery that the disciples may have felt when they left their nets and followed after this stranger in whom they saw God. And we might acquire a taste for the world that is coming. . . and indeed one that is, in some profound sense, already here.