

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to morning prayers. I'm sorry to say that Professor [inaudible 00:02:17] will not be able to join us this morning, that you will be stuck with me instead, but please rise as you're able and join our responsive reading, Psalm number 2 on the first page of your black Psalter. Why did the nations conspire and peoples plot in vain?

Congregation:

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take council together against the Lord and his anointed saying ...

Elizabeth Propst:

Let us burst their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us.

Congregation:

He who sit in the heavens laughs. The Lord has them in derision.

Elizabeth Propst:

Then, he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury, saying ...

Congregation:

I've set my kingdom Zion, my holy city.

Elizabeth Propst:

I will tell of the degree of the Lord. He said to me, you are my son. Today, I have begotten you.

Congregation:

Ask for me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

Elizabeth Propst:

You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

Congregation:

Now therefore, kings be wise. Be warned, rulers of the earth.

Choir:

(singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

Today's reading is from the Book of Jonah, chapter 4, beginning of the 5th verse. Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The Lord God appointed a bush and made it come up over Jonah to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So, Jonah was very happy about the bush.

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" He said, "Yes," and ran off to die. Then, the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush for which you did not labor, and which you did grow. It came into being in the night, and perished in the night, and should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" Here lies the lesson.

So, you guys might remember the Book of Jonah from Sunday School, as I do. You might remember the story. God convinced Jonah to go to Nineveh, a wicked city, and to prophesy its destruction. Jonah refuses the call to prophesy, and he runs away, and he is swallowed by a giant fish, and then prays to God, and the fish spits him out. Then, Jonah goes to Nineveh and tells them of their coming destruction. The people of Nineveh repent, and God doesn't destroy the city.

It's a good story, kind of a weird story, which is maybe it's so often relegated to the realm of Sunday School. But you might be less familiar with the end of the Book of Jonah, which are the lines that we just heard. Jonah, as a character, is stubborn, something of a misanthrope, I would say, and he's not particularly happy that God has decided to spare Nineveh its destruction. It seems unjust to him that the city has been saved, and that his ordeal has seemingly been for nothing.

So, afterwards, he walks out into the desert, fuming, and sits down, and waits, just wishing that God would change God's mind and destroy the city after all. Then, God sends some strange plant to shade him from the sun, but the next day sends a worm to kill the plant, and then sends the sun and the wind to beat down on Jonah, and Jonah is not particularly happy about this.

Then, the book ends with this dialog between God and Jonah, with God asking, "Is it right for you to be angry about this plant for which you did not labor, and which you did not grow?" Now, many interpretations of this passage and of this ending to the book take these questions as a harsh rebuke, interpreted as Jonah being selfish, and hard-hearted, and hypocritical, and these questions are God telling Jonah that his anger is unjustified, that he has no ground for concern for this plant that he didn't grow, that he had no part in making.

So, the message of this ending for many people is that, when times get tough, we must push down our frustration and our anger with the world, and with God, and to trust in God's all-loving power. I don't particularly hold with this interpretation, because I think the more that I think about it, the more that Jonah kind of has a point. Nineveh, if you don't know, is an Assyrian city, and the Assyrian Empire were bitter enemies of Israel. When the Assyrian Empire conquered Northern Israel, they deported 10 of the 12 tribes. They forced them to assimilate in foreign cultures, and those tribes were lost forever to history. Their culture and their memory is gone.

So, for Jonah to go to Nineveh, to make himself intensely vulnerable, would be understandably painful and difficult for God to call him to go to this city. I imagine Jonah sitting there thinking, "I sat inside a fish for three days, and you changed your mind. You told me that the people of Nineveh were wicked, and cruel, and brutal people, and they, for less than a week, say but they feel really bad about it, and they

won't do it again, and you forgive them like that." Then, God so coyly asks, "Is it right for you to be upset about the plant?" knowing full well that God created and destroyed the plant for no other reason than to make Jonah upset.

So, Jonah, having had it up to here, understandably says, "I am so angry that I wish I was dead." I don't think the interpretation that God is telling Jonah that this anger is wrong, or immoral, or hypocritical is a particularly good one, because I think that it echoes the many, many millions of people in this country who have been told that their righteous anger is wrong, or ungrateful, or takes up too much space, or makes people uncomfortable, or is misguided, or unproductive, as if who gets to be angry in a country is not a political question, and a question of privilege. "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant ..." God says, "... for which you did not labor, for which you did not grow?" When I hear that, I think of the way that I felt earlier this June when Roe v. Wade was overturned, something that I had no part in bringing about, no part in growing, and yet for me and so many millions of people, we grieve the loss of that statute, because in its shade, we felt safe. It's not only understandable, but justified, to feel rage at the loss of that safety and that security.

When I look at the Sackler name on the museum across the street, I feel angry. When I think that there have been 13 mass shootings in this country in the last week, since we last held space here last Tuesday. 26 people have died of gun violence in those shootings, when we, as a country, have the power to prevent that, that makes me angry. It makes me angry like Jonah to think that the powerful people who benefit from the systems that cause this suffering will not be punished in the way that I at least understand it.

So, God asks Jonah, and perhaps us, these questions. "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant which you had no part in growing? Is it right that I, God, should care for Nineveh, and for its people and its animals?" I don't think that we have to read these questions as a moral lesson, or as a reprimand, or as a call to push down our feelings of anger, of injustice.

I think God is actually asking us a question, asking Jonah these questions, to think about what our anger looks like and what it does. Do you know what is good? Do you know who is deserving of love, of God's love? Are you free of pride, of delusion, of complicity? Do you think you have been chosen to hand out punishments? Are you that righteous? Are you that justified?

Answering these questions, and looking at them within ourselves, doesn't require us to subsume our anger, or to set it aside in favor of trust and love, but we do need to look at where our anger goes and what it does, to make sure that it does not perpetuate the very harms that begot it. God asks us if perhaps there's something more productive that we can do with our anger, if instead of sitting in the desert and sulking, wishing for God to rain down hellfire on our enemies, perhaps we should instead follow the model of Jesus Christ, and go see if there's a money changing table that we can flip.

To have faith in a God whose infinite love surpasses all our understanding might require us to sacrifice our attachment to what we think justice ought to look like, and in return for that sacrifice, we will seek the mystery of the God who grieves when we cannot grieve, forgives what we cannot forgive, and who loves what we cannot love. Will you pray with me?

God of comfort, God of sorrow, God of justice, God of loss, give us courage to set aside easy answers and empty platitudes. Give us clarity to separate our righteous anger from pride, selfishness, and contempt. Give us compassion to mourn for those who are consumed by hatred, just as we mourn for those whom their hatred oppresses. In Your name we pray, amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise, as you're able, and join in saying The Lord's Prayer.

Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever, amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please join in our hymn, I Sing a Song of Thanks to God, number 87 in your crimson hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

Christ has no voice in this world but your voice, and no hands in this world but your hands. Let the work of our hands and our voices be the work of love and justice on this day, and on all days. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.