

“What a week it has been! It sure is good to be here away from it all: Our singing, William’s worship leading, the fellowship all help wash away the concerns of the world....even if for just an hour. It’s no wonder we worship in a sanctuary. We come here seeking sanctuary from everything out there.

What a week! First Hank’s mother got weaker, my preaching seminar crept closer on my calendar, and I came home Wednesday to a tired husband, and a hungry dog. Turned on the news, I heard that a government drone nearly crashed into a jetload of people and that 2014 was the warmest year on record. Thursday I went to Pastor Peer near Cleveland and learned that a huge gathering at Hartville Mennonite Friday and Saturday would be attended by many Mennonite agencies, as well as churches who would like to continue to read the Bible in exclusively literal ways, and form a new conference, leaving everyone who sees beauty in diversity and interprets the Scripture more broadly excluded. I asked myself how this could be, since I have loved the Mennonite Church for most of my 61 years I cannot understand the fear and the homophobia and the self-righteousness and I cry

out to God! “How long, O God, will you allow us walk in circles? You came to us with skin on and we still didn’t get it. Then you came back to life and explained to your twelve disciples (who were all so different in personalities and understandings) why you died and conquered death. Why can’t we all just get along? The world is out to prove religion a joke. Is there no integrity left? Can it get any worse?”

This had to have been along the same line of thought that Jonah had, surrounded by fishguts, in the belly of the big fish. He begged then! He prayed like he had never prayed before. And God heard him.

Perhaps Jonah had been sure of himself before that fateful boat ride. He was so sure that he went below deck to take a nap! After all, he had rationalized that God wasn’t *really* calling him to Ninevah. His thought pattern went something like this: I am a prophet of great ability and faithfulness. The people of Tarshish need God, *too*. I have peace in my heart when I think about this decision of going to Tarshish. And I feel fear and darkness when I think of Ninevah. Oh, I love Ninevah, *too*, but I’m not the man to reach *those* Gentiles. I just feel like going to Tarshish is the right thing.” And we went below in the ship to take a nap.

Have you been there, on your way to Tarshish? I have. When we decide to disobey, we can always find an excuse, and the money for the ticket to Tarshish. Isn't it too bad that we have to be wallowing in fishguts before we start to *really* pray? Wouldn't it be a lot better if we started listening and obeying before catastrophes have to happen to wake us up? Wouldn't it be better if we learn from our past trips to Tarshish that Ninevah is really where God calls us?

On Thursday, I had heard myself promising Ralph Reinford, our patient and longsuffering Ohio conference minister, that I would fast and pray for him and for the entire conference on Friday. And then.... Friday came. From the very early morning, hymns about **grace** started coming to mind and the silence wrapped me in worship of a God who waits and has us wait....for things worthwhile....spring, parking lots, this loving congregation and yes, even possible unity in diversity in the larger Mennonite church. The grace of God carried me and lifted me to the shores of agape love, where conflict is a healthy dialogue and commitment to stay together overrides correct Biblical interpretation, where grace is not dangled like a roll of money, or the size of a church budget, or the size of a church, but given freely to all. The grace of God is vast and comes to us for nothing. All that is required is a repentant

heart. *Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch (in fishguts) like me. I once was lost (in the belly of a fish) , but now, I'm found, was blind (to God's way), but now I see!*

Jonah was not about grace. He was a “Concerned Prophet” and knew that the Ninevites were *evi- full of sin*. He *wanted out* and so he *took action*. He went in the opposite direction and formed his own... destiny. He ended up in the belly of a fish.

Jonah was taught that God's grace extends far beyond the peoples that we think deserve it. Jonah scoffed at the Ninevites and ran from them. After his second chance, he learns that God ran *toward* them.

And then Jesus, much greater than Jonah, showed how God loves *all* people, no matter if they are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (*or anything in between!!!*). They are all *equal* in his sight, in the eyes of our loving heavenly father, we are *all sinners set free by the blood of the Lamb*.

I learned that God's capacity to clean things up is infinitely **greater** than our human capacity to mess things up. I learned about the “stubbornness” of

God to accomplish his will, regardless of how hard we may try to thwart it. In fact, as I reflected Friday on that painful season of my life when I went to Tarshish rather than Ninevay, I can honestly say that I am genuinely thankful for all the ache I experienced. For it was during this trying time that God helped me recognize, (through the story of Jonah!), the practical relevance of the gospel—that everything I need and long for, in Christ, I already possesses.

Our New Testament passage talks of fish also, of Jesus making fishers of men, calling his disciples from hard-working men, mostly fisherman, all Jews. In three short years, Jesus shaped them and molded them.

There is a saying that goes: “ We live life forward but understand it backward.” The disciples understood more clearly what the new church of which they were leaders, was to look like, AFTER Jesus’ death and resurrection, they realized that he “endured the cross” so that all could become God’s friends (Heb.12:2). **God is love.** Our faith must be based on this and it must be the **central** tenant of our lives. Suffering and the way of the cross has to do with openness and radical love to everyone. That’s why they killed Jesus. He didn’t fit the box. And he refused to stay in the box in

which the church tried to keep him. He knew his destiny. (Read Matt. 12: 38-40.)

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." **39** But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. **40** For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

We, like the Ninevites were all enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). We crucified His Son! We threw Jonah over the side of the boat and prayed to other gods to save us. We, too, are in need of repentance, *daily*, for our sins.

But we have a big God, and God does not force. God forgives 70x7 and expects the same of us, as we take on the incarnation of our Lord, Jesus. He pursues but he does not force. He allows big fish to swallow us, but his teaching starts with love and ends with acceptance and blessings. Yes, he hates sin, he hates evil, but he waits on the porch of heaven for his prodigal, proud, self-serving sons and daughters to come home. ALL OF THEM.

Jonah is all about *God*. The fish is only mentioned 4x., the city 9x, Jonah 18x, but God is mentioned 38times. It's about God, but it also teaches us about how prayer can change things. Jonah was a good guy. Hebrews mentions him, but like all of us, Jonah had a **tribal** heart. He wanted what he

wanted and he wanted to protect himself from those **different** than him. God, on the other hand, had a missionary heart. Self-sacrifice is in God's deck of cards. The whole Gospel story is God sacrificing himself for his enemies! God's grace and forgiveness is free, but we still have to live into his calling in each of our lives. That's the hard part, where there are blessings that may seem to turn into curses, like the plant sprouting up out of nowhere to give Jonah shade only to be eaten by worms, leaving him in the boiling temperatures. And obedient life is never easy either. But together, we journey on! Regurgitated onto the shores of life, we pick ourselves up and shine the Christ light for each other.

Don't be afraid to go to Ninevah! Ninevah may be, for you, whatever pulls you out of your comfort zone. Ninevah may be where people have hurt you deeply, but God is calling you to go to them with his message; Ninevah may be where God calls you and you don't want to go; Ninevah may be whatever you hate that God loves deeply. Ninevah will be dangerous, but gloriously life-changing with the Spirit by your side.

As I reflected on this past week-- Hank's mom, our fractured Ohio conference, and the love of God-- I felt a deep surge of gratitude and

gratefulness to be here with you, in a church all about being forgiven sinners and forgiving sinners, all about obeying the call of God.

This week, go forth into the world, making disciples, companioning with others in Akron, Barberton, Norton, Canton, Wooster, Kidron, Orrville! Our loving Spirit will carry you! Next Sunday, we will take holy communion together and we will be anointed with the Spirit's oil of gladness to preach and live the good news. May this is be *so*! And may any and all be invited to our feast next weekend. Soup for all! *Come, ye disconsolate*, come all you rich and poor, everyone, there will be grace more than enough for all. With left-overs for sure.

AMEN.

