

# **Clergy Task Force Against Family Violence**

## **Speak Out Sunday January 25, 2009**

Commentaries on:

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## Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (NIV)

1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. 4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." 5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

### A Jewish Perspective

Jonah goes to Nineveh and fulfills his assigned task: he urges the sinners to repent before God punishes them. They listen and understand his message, and indeed repent, thus averting God's punishment. Their behavior reinforces a message that Jonah did not understand when God first called him.

Jonah did not want this job, and he fled to the sea. In his time, gods were believed to be local; that is, each country and people had its own deity, and if you left, that god or goddess could not follow you. Jonah thought that if he left his home and went to sea, he could get away from God. But he was mistaken, and not only did God follow him, but the Ninevites also understood the power of Jonah's God, and obeyed God's commandment.

Just as the abuser tries to convince his victim that she is out of God's "territory", as it were, we must teach her and comfort her that God is indeed wherever she is. Not only is she not the sinner who is threatened if she does not "repent," her abuser is not God. Wherever she goes, God will be with her on her journey, and at her destination.

### A Presbyterian Perspective

Notice that Jonah did not have to go very far for change to occur. The Scripture tells us that Nineveh is an exceedingly large city – a whole three days journey across on foot (I think I can cross Maryville in about 3 hours, and I am being generous) – and yet Jonah only walked for one day. He's still on the edge of the town, not even in the center. It would be fair to assume that he walks into Nineveh a day's length, tells the people, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown," turns around and walks right back out. The Scripture doesn't tell us anything different. And even though the effort that Jonah put in was minimal, the payout was huge. It changed lives, dramatically. God no longer wanted to destroy the town, but decided to redeem it. Jonah did the minimal amount of prophecy that he could possibly do, and yet God took it and used it. People listened. People believed. And people

### A Baptist Perspective

In **verse 1**, Jonah is given a second commission to go and declare God's message to the Nineveh. This prophetic voice is definitely not based on Jonah's merit for he is reluctant to go, but God patiently prods Jonah back into service. God does not threaten Jonah but simply reminds him to carry on with his task. Too often ministers are called to deliver the truth to our congregations that abuse is sinful, but either due to apathy because supposedly "we don't have those types of issues in our church" or due to fear "I could upset some major donors to this church," the pastors fail to do so. God is calling us again to speak out against family violence and uncloak all forms of abusive behaviors.

**Verse 2** is a repetition of the initial call but with a minor change. God tells Jonah to "proclaim to it (the city)" versus the original demand to "cry against it (the city)." Also, the writer is pointing out that this proclamation is from God. The emphatic usage of "I," connected to a participle drives home the point that this is an important message not from a human named Jonah, but a "message that I (God) tell you."

In **verse 3**, the reader is told that Nineveh is an "exceedingly great city." There are two levels to this phrase: the physical and the spiritual. Physically, the city's size is described as being a

### **A Presbyterian Perspective (cont'd)**

were saved. Just take a step to the right direction. Recognize where God is calling you and try the journey. You don't have to go very far to see the change that will occur. And it is always, always for the better.

### **A Baptist Perspective (continued)**

three days' walk across. This statement has caused much debate because the actual ruins of the city are only eight miles in circumference. So some scholars suggest that Jonah went out from Nineveh proper into the surrounding villages as well. Other scholars suggest that it took three days to weave through all of the irregular streets in order that everyone could hear the message. The spiritual level comes from the addition in the Hebrew text that Nineveh was an "exceedingly great city to God". The phrase "to God" implies the approximately 100,000 individuals who live in the Nineveh area and who are precious to God.

**Verse 4** does not provide us with any clue as to why Nineveh is being punished. We don't know what this great mass of people has done, unlike the sins of Sodom. Maybe the city of Nineveh's sins were that of family violence. Maybe people thought that domestic violence was the norm; people were condoning abusive behaviors. What we do know is that the verse shows the emphasis that God is placing on his concern for the people. Jonah does not go to the King's courtroom to declare the word. He is not going to places of the high and mighty. Instead he is actively talking with the common people. We cannot allow ourselves to think that the message concerning healthy relationship can be simply disseminated by some overarching governmental pamphlet board. The real task of spreading the word about family violence and where to go for help occurs as the ministers and lay leaders share the word of hope among their congregants during Bible Studies, Wednesday night speakers, a few words during a sermon, etc.

The message that Jonah delivers is simplistic and concise "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Overthrown literally means to be overturned. There is certainty in the message, Nineveh will be overthrown, plain and simple. Maybe that is all it takes, a simple concise message to make an impact. How about "Real Men Choose Not to Abuse," "Family Violence is Not a Family Value," "There is No Excuse for Domestic Violence," or "Family Violence is a Sin."

In **verse 5**, we are amazed to see what can happen when we boil the message down to the basics. The Ninevites in all their wealth, power and control are shaken by the terse word from God. Imagine the citizens in their fine robes hearing the words from this plain Hebrew who wanders out of the desert to share a message. When we tell people that abuse is wrong, we unmask all pretenses. We drop the façade or smiling, untroubled family situations and shed light on the real world boiling beneath. The words against abusive power and control helps people to break free and turn to the healthy ways of living expressed in God's word.

In **verse 10**, the people changed their behavior. It was not simply lip service, there were real changes in behavior and attitudes. An abuser is a professional at giving lip service. They will lie all day if it gets the victim to stay in the relationship. In order for the abuser to be set right before God and humanity is for there to be a true and lasting repentance (a turning from their evil ways). Only when abusers conscientiously change their ways by choosing not to abuse will God hold his anger against them. It is up to the abuser to seek out professional help in order for the abusers to be held accountable and to change.

## Psalm 62:5-12 (NIV)

- 5 Find rest, O my soul, in God alone;  
my hope comes from him.
- 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation;  
he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.
- 7 My salvation and my honor depend on God;  
he is my mighty rock, my refuge.
- 8 Trust in him at all times, O people;  
pour out your hearts to him,  
for God is our refuge.  
Selah
- 9 Lowborn men are but a breath,  
the highborn are but a lie;  
if weighed on a balance, they are nothing;  
together they are only a breath.
- 10 Do not trust in extortion  
or take pride in stolen goods;  
though your riches increase,  
do not set your heart on them.
- 11 One thing God has spoken,  
two things have I heard:  
that you, O God, are strong,  
12 and that you, O Lord, are loving.  
Surely you will reward each person  
according to what he has done.

### A Catholic Perspective

Psalm 62 A psalm of trust, contains some of the most powerful language of trust in God in the Psalter.

The imagery in verse 4 is a powerful description of victims of violence: *“like a sagging fence, a wall knocked down”*. Victims of domestic violence often feel this way. However, their physical body (wall) may be

### A Jewish Perspective

The soul of one who is abused is surely quiet—to the world and those around her. Yet is not entirely silent, for it speaks in ways that God can hear, that touch God’s own heart. It is a sacred conversation that can mean survival for one who suffers, knowing that God hears her, that the Shechinah, the Indwelling Presence of

### A Presbyterian Perspective

How often have you waited in silence on God? I am sure that this passage resonates with you. You have heard that God is our hope, that God is alone our rock and salvation and that God will deliver. And yet you remain in a situation that is hell, and delivery from it is nowhere in sight. The Psalmist does not tell us how long he has been waiting in this silence. It could be a day. It could be a week. It could be a year. It could be several years. For the psalmist, God has spoken once to him. Once. Sometimes when we are busy begging God for answers, God’s response gets lost in the midst of our cries. We cannot hear it. Wait in silence on God, just a little longer. When God speaks, you will know it.

### A Baptist Perspective

Although verses 1-4 are technically not part of the lectionary reading for today, they are extremely important in light of the issue of family violence. Verse 1’s phrase that “my soul waits in silence” can symbolize two issues. First, when a victim of abuse is at the breaking point they can start to shut down. They become numb to the pain and become withdrawn due to the evil inflicted on them. So they become silent. Yet it is here in the stillness that God’s word of hope can be heard as they discover that their faith community does truly care about their

### An Episcopal Perspective

This powerful selection from the psalms proclaims important things for us to hold to our hearts. First, we are very valuable to God. Our trust in Him is the source of amazing internal strength, and God does not want us to lose the honor and value that He has given us. No matter what happens to us, no matter how beat down we might seem to be, we are still very valuable to God when it seems we are worth nothing to anyone else.

### **A Catholic Perspective (cont'd)**

knocked down over and over. The victim is placed in a situations of powerlessness and feels totally alone. Trust is deeply affected. Ps 62 offers hope. Verse 5-6: Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.

Rock, as an image, symbolizes a safe, secure reality. For a victim, safety is longed for; safety for the victim and for her children. The abused want a secure place where they do not have to be fearful of violence or neediness.

The psalm is speaking to God. However, God acts through his people. We may quite literally be called to become their "refuge", their "mighty rock", their "fortress", even their "salvation" in the sense of saving them from harm by our efforts on their behalf.

Assisting the abused requires wisdom and courage. Psalm 62 calls each of us to trust in God and the divine oracle speaks of the might and steadfast love (*hesed*) of God. God's Loving Kindness is our foundation as individuals, as a people. With God and one another we can be strong for persons who are "*like a sagging fence, a wall knocked down.*"

### **A Jewish Perspective (cont'd)**

the Holy Spirit, dwells within her as well.

It is significant that the word for "man," "*ish*," in verse 4, often stands for "person." It does not have to be understood only as masculine.

It is often the case that an abuser believes in his ability to control through violence more than his ability to gain respect through kindness and trust. In his own self-doubt, he escalates his abuse to reaffirm his need to control others rather than himself. The psalmist tells him that his belief in the power of force and in his own violence is worthless. The psalmist here reminds the abused that God hears her and is with her; at the same time, he reminds the abuser that God will hold him accountable for his abuse.

### **A Baptist Perspective (cont'd.)**

situation. Secondly, victims may be faced with a chaotic time in their lives. The abuse, the struggle to know what to do and the strength to follow through becomes a raging storm, a maelstrom of pain. In this case, victims have to quiet themselves and LISTEN to the help that is for them. God is using people (advocates, police, etc.) to bring deliverance, salvation from the enemy. The victim needs a safe place to find a place of calm. Pastors must question themselves if there offices are safe places for a victim to share their deepest problems.

**Verse 4** talks about the lies that abusers will tell. So many abusers are "two-faced;" they can roll off compliments so easily but possess such hatred in their hearts. Some abusers are experts at playing the role of a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Abusers can appear so wonderful on the outside but the victim has seen the sinister side that lurks below the surface.

### **An Episcopal Perspective (cont'd)**

The deliverance of God comes through his caring people who can become the rock that protects us and provide the healing of our minds and souls which enable us to know how valuable we are. Those high born or rich and powerful are living in a self-delusion of their importance. God declares "the lowly" are very important in His eyes. God is the source of our future strength and life, not another person who is bit by bit trying to destroy us. God's special servants can provide for us new paths of life. Be open to them.

## **Notes**

## A Baptist Perspective

**Verse 5** repeats the idea of verse 1, but this time the verse is a reaction to verse 4 where the writer has expressed disappointment in the falsehoods told by the abuser. Then in the **verse 6**, the person cries out with a defiant voice declaring that God is a solid place of security. It is from leaning on God that the person feels unmovable. God is the ultimate protector.

In **verse 7**, the victim announces that the lies told by the abuser will not overcome the truth that God knows about the victim. To many times, the abuser threatens to destroy the victim's reputation if the individual seeks assistance. The victim is told, "You go to the police, then I'll tell them you are an unfit mother. I'll tell them you are insane. The church is going to believe me not you; I am the one who served as the Sunday School teacher all these years." The victim knows that in the end God will uphold the victim's honor; the abuser will use many forms of emotional abuse, but their personal integrity will never be torn away.

**[In verse 8]** the victim is encouraged to open up to God. Be honest with God about the situation because God truly cares about the person. God wants the victim and the victim's children safe. This safety not only comes in the form of a mental refuge in which our emotional self is protected, but it may also mean that there are times in which the victim needs a literal place of refuge. It may be the situation where the victim has to go into shelter to hide out while the legal side of domestic violence can run its course.

**[verses 9-12]** God is showing the victim a love that will never end. It is not a fickle, conditional love that abusers utilize. In this type of relationship, the victim is walking around not knowing if they are on the abuser's good or bad side today. God's love is unmovable; God will always be there, in all circumstances, no matter what life brings to a person.

## Mark 1:14-20 (NIV)

14After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

16As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 17"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." 18At once they left their nets and followed him.

19When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. 20Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

## A Presbyterian Perspective

In this gospel text from Mark we see the influence of the sense of urgency that the gospel of Matthew is written with: "And immediately they left their nets and followed him (v.18)" and "Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him (v.20)." What is gripping is the thought that the immediacy of this text makes clear to the reader that the disciples made no consultations with friends or family, took no time to gather belongings or set their affairs in order. Rather, they get up and they go. Right then and there. When becoming a follower of Christ we are called to do the same: to leave behind our previous selves and start anew. To trust that the future before us is a future in the hands of God. Better still, the calling of the disciples demonstrates for us that there is no prerequisite on our parts – we do not need to **be** something, **do** something, **say** something, **pay** something, **pray** something to be called. Christ approaches us in the midst of our lives and turns things upside down and around in the whirlwind of his immediacy. This is the good news that is being proclaimed: God meets us where we are and offers us a new beginning.

## Notes