

Climate Change—Vulnerability, Lament and Promise

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This year's theme invites us to join the global communion of Lutheran churches in lamenting the suffering brought about by global climate change, and calling for action to mitigate its effects, for the sake of God's whole creation. The current issue of Lutheran World Information includes stories about climate change's effects from Lutherans living in Greenland, Latin America, Africa, the Pacific Islands, and Asia.

<http://www.lutheranworld.org/Essentials/LWF-Publications.html>

“Jonah and Global Warming” Text: Jonah 3:4-4:13

Who are we in this text from Jonah? I have preached many sermons on Jonah, taking the role of Jonah. That wonderful bush – its growing up to give shade, then its withering—teaches Jonah and us that God's grace is bigger than we realize.

But what if instead of seeing ourselves as the reluctant prophet who needs to go preach to the great city that needs to repent...

What if we are the great city that needs to repent? What if we are Nineveh?

Just to review: Nineveh was the capital city of the most powerful empire in the world, the Assyrian empire. Jonah doesn't list its sins, but the prophet Nahum does: War, it's a “city of bloodshed... that enslaves nations” (Nahum 3:1). And perhaps a propos to our current economic crisis and Wall Street bailout, “You increased your merchants more than the stars of heaven” (Nahum 3:16).

Nineveh, this great city, this capital of a world trading empire, has come to God's attention.

But God doesn't want Nineveh to be destroyed. God wants Nineveh to turn, to repent. God wants to save Nineveh.

There is so much good news in the book of Jonah that can help us. So much good news.

For the fact is that we too live at a moment when God wants the greatest empire on earth to turn, to change course (the meaning of the world repentance)—immediately-- so that the world will not be destroyed.

To be sure, we face many crises today. But the most perilous crisis, the crisis we and our empire are causing, the one that carries the most perilous long-term consequences for hundreds of millions of people, is global climate change. The crisis is the warming of the planet— or “weirding” of the planet, as Thomas Friedman calls it—as a result of our burning of fossil fuels at ever-accelerating rates.

Global climate change is the crisis that is already hurting so many vulnerable people around the world. I have met some of them in my travels for the Lutheran World Federation. Last April I spoke at the Alaska Synod Assembly and was privileged to meet native people from Shishmaref—Lutherans—whose houses are falling into the ocean because of the loss of sea ice that used to protect their island village from violent storms. You can read many testimonies of Lutherans around the world experiencing climate change at <http://www.lutheranworld.org/Essentials/LWF-Publications.html>

I have met Africans who have been farmers for generations who are no longer able to raise a crop because the rains never come. Droughts in much of Africa are unprecedented, and climate models predict that they will worsen as carbon dioxide concentrations increase. The great injustice of climate change is that communities that have done nothing to cause it live in places that will experience the greatest suffering. Whole islands in the Pacific are already disappearing because of increasing sea levels.

“Just forty days,” Jonah tells Nineveh.

Perhaps Nineveh didn’t realize that what it was doing to the world—to other nations and to its own people—was wrong.

For a long time we didn’t realize the consequences of fossil fuel burning. We didn’t know about the physics of the greenhouse and the danger that carbon emissions were causing to the atmosphere. But since 1988—for the last 20 years-- we HAVE known, we HAVE been warned, by prophets like NASA scientist James Hansen who have been trying to tell us.

And yet, like Jonah, our country went in the opposite direction from where we should have gone. We thumbed our noses at the scientists, buying a ticket to Tarshish. Proudly, patriotically, with broad public consent, we and our leaders ran our economy as fast as we could in the opposite direction from where prophetic voices told us we should have gone. We named our driving of gas-guzzling SUVs “the American way of life”—and then went to war because “the American way of life is not negotiable.” We partied away instead of starting to make the modest, measured changes that could have saved us.

“Just 40 days and this great city will be destroyed.” Like Jonah sent to preach to Nineveh, God has been sending scientists as prophets to us to plead with us, to warn us of the irreversible tipping points we risk triggering, such as the melting of the Arctic sea ice, the melting of the Greenland ice sheet that will cause sea levels to rise.

“Just ten years,” the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports tell us—and I believe the reports. I hope you believe them too.

If we want to have any hope of keeping global temperature increases below 3.6 degrees, and keeping carbon concentrations at 440 parts per million, we must start decreasing our carbon emissions by the year 2015. And the best scientists like James Hansen now say we may need to get the numbers even lower, back to 350. If we don't repent, If we don't turn around, the consequences would be disastrous. Pretty urgent.

Yet There is so much good news in the book of Jonah that can help us face this crisis.

1) First, that God love Nineveh. God still loves this city, God loves the more than 120,000 people and also the many animals! This is good news for us. God does not consign Nineveh to certain destruction. God wants to avert the destruction. God loves us passionately.

2) Second, perhaps most amazing, the good news that that Nineveh can and does turn. The people of Nineveh do repent. They put on sackcloth and ashes-- even the animals. The model Nineveh provides of how a huge imperial capital city turned in just 40 days can serve for us as a model of how the greatest empire on earth yet today can shift course. With good leadership, Nineveh, this giant ship of state, and all the people and animals, changed course. It changed policy. FAST.

How did it do it? How did it deal with all the nay-sayers, all the arguments that it would cost too much? How did it deal with the skeptics who thought that Jonah the prophet was exaggerating the danger? What about all the arguments that you can't interfere in the free markets (although last week those arguments went out the window with the Wall Stree bail-outs), or that you can't repent until the ancient equivalents of China and India do—I suppose that would have been Babylon and Tyre—because then you won't be competitive in the world market?

The Bible tells us that the whole city of Nineveh, the imperial capital, turned. That's what repentance means. It changed course.

Humbly, the king said “this is what we have to do.” He embarked on a fast-track campaign to change public will. He made his case: “Perhaps it will be in time. Hopefully we are in time to avert the disaster so we will not be destroyed.”

He even enlists the animals to join in the turning. The whole community.

3) The third and best piece of good news is that disaster is averted! God DOES relent. This, of course, is what makes Jonah so angry in this hilarious pouting scene with the bush in chapter 4. “I knew you were a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

Time is short—only 40 days. But the good news of Jonah is there is still time to avert the disaster. There is still time for us, our best scientists assure us. Not much time, but enough time. Ten years of grace. If we don't go beyond those irreversible tipping points, the creation has amazing power to heal.

To be sure, global warming is not a punishment from God. That's a big difference from the Jonah story and we need to say it. It's not punishment, but it is the logic of consequences, the fact that in this physical universe that God has created, with this wonderful atmosphere, certain actions cause other things to happen. That's the physics of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that trap heat. You cannot keep increasing carbon without warming the planet.

But nonetheless God has built this beautiful planet with grace and healing.

Nineveh can serve as a parable for our country, for all of us. A model, an inspiration, for the urgent repentance required of us in these next crucial years.

There is unbelievable good news for Nineveh in this story, good news that we can take to heart. Surely we can do as well as Nineveh.

The prophet Jonah is still speaking today. God is still teaching us important lessons through plants. And God still loves the great city so much as to plead with it to turn. It is not too late.

Turn us, O God. Turn us, turn us to you, in Jesus' name. AMEN