



SIEBENQUELL

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# The Sign of Jonah

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»As the crowds were increasing, Jesus said, 'This is a wicked generation. It demands a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.'« (Lk 11, 29)

Demanding a sign is a common practice when we are embattled. It is also a delaying tactic. Unsurprisingly, the God who calls us to choose life, the God who calls us to follow, to rise up, to hold fast and run the good race to the end is never willing to give in to our baser impulse to live in paralysis.

There is will only one sign that will be given us, the sign of Jonah. What, pray tell, is this sign? It is what the biblical story names metanoia. Lightly translated as repentance, it has become a word of vague and grey notions. Yet, there is nothing nebulous about the sign of the Prophet Jonah. The minute he cross the threshold of the gates of Nineveh, the people of the city know precisely not only what must be done, but also that they are the ones who need to do it.

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For the call of metanoia makes three very precise demands:

Change the direction you are taking!

Change the manner in which you are acting.

Change your way of looking at the world.

When we demand a sign, we are insisting that God show us something to impress us. The suggestive undertone is, that should he impress us greatly enough, then, perhaps, we would be moved. This is the manner of spectators. It is the same attitude we carry into our theaters and sport stadiums. The sign we crave has the purpose of proving who God is and of what he is capable. We are testing God's mettle.

The sign of Jonah will displease all who wish to be mere spectators. This sign raises the question of metanoia: Will we endeavour to discover who we are and of what we are capable? Would we be willing to test our own mettle?

If we would change the direction you we have set out on, change the manner in which we have been acting and change our comfortable and unquestioned way of looking at the world, then we must be capable of a threefold greatness: We must be able to live freely, to take on responsibility and to act creatively.

Then, like the people of Nineveh, we will know the truth about ourselves. Jonah's message is stunningly simple: »Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned«. (Jonah 3, 4) It points to the dire reality that looms before a city and its citizens. It makes clear that the time to act is limited. It raises the urgency of the hour. Yet, it dictates no course of action. This is the decision to be taken. We must be the ones to make it.

The people of Nineveh take this challenge seriously. They live freely and change the direction they are taking! »Let each one turn from his evil ways.« (Jonah 3, 8) They take on responsibility and change the manner in which they are acting. »Let each one... turn from the violence in his hands.« (Jonah 3, 8) And they act creatively by changing their way of looking at the world: they »believed God« (Jonah 3, 5) and not Jonah. Thus, they placed their faith in someone who can guarantee a life and a future. They exercised restraint by proclaiming a fast. They showed a willingness to return to a simpler, sustainable way of life, rather than carry on with the relentless hunger to consume.

Today we stand not only with and before one who is greater than Jonah, but we stand in the throes of a crisis no less deadly, no less dangerous, and not one wit less drastic than Nineveh. A pandemic has swept the globe, from north to south, from east to west, leaving no nation, no people, undamaged. The very earth itself is endangered by our ravaging consumption of her resources, our inconsideration of her sustaining, and our narrow focus on our personal pleasures. Peace lays in rags at our doorstep, but we step over her dormant form like the rich man over Lazarus and his sores, as he enters and leaves his house of luxury and plenty.

Still we take no action. We do not change the direction we are taking, nor the manner in which we are acting. We are not changing our way of looking at the world, its needs and our role within it. Indeed, there is moaning aplenty. Groans are heard throughout the land, indignation simmers in the pews of our churches, and outrage fuels what parades as political discourse. Yet, while we are weary of drawn out crisis, no crisis seems to draw us out of our weariness.

In a speech of the House of Commons, on November 12, 1936, Sir Winston Churchill criticised Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's reluctance to undertake any meaning measures against the ever-growing threat raised by Hitler.

»So they go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all powerful to be impotent.«

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History has sternly judged the manner in which Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain dealt with the crisis of the rise of Fascism in their day. Should we continue to be »resolved to be irresolute«, then the judgement over us will be no less severe: »The men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with this generation and will condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, greater than Jonah is here.« (Lk 11, 32)

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