

## Sackcloth and Ashes

communion meditation

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Jonah 3:4-9

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After nearly three months in hiding, Tiger Woods emerged to speak to the public on Friday. By now everyone is aware of his appearance in a news conference that rivaled the TV coverage and public interest of a presidential address. After an auto accident at Thanksgiving and numerous supermarket tabloid reports of marital infidelity, Tiger stood up Friday before a select audience, and all of the television public who wanted to hear, and said, "I had affairs. I cheated. What I did is not acceptable, and I am the only person to blame." His fifteen minute apology was followed by media commentaries and comments debating the sincerity of his statement and its impact on his public image, his professional future, and his family. While some viewed this as a ploy to regain a lost fortune, others questioned the public's right to an opinion in this private matter. But in our society, celebrities are viewed as public property with only limited rights to privacy.

I suspect that Woods received counsel to make a public apology. If we have learned anything from public scandals like Watergate and the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, we know that honesty is a better policy than cover-up. To be sure, enormous sums of money are at stake tied to restoring Tiger's public image. While I do not dismiss the business factor, something greater is at stake. The ability to live with self and the people you love requires honesty, and sometimes a commitment to a changed direction in life. I was impressed with the man's demeanor and believe that his concern for his marriage and family was real. His comment about words was on target, "my real apology. . . will not come in the form of words; it will come from my behavior over time." My prayers are for the healing of the man and his family.

**Healing is tied to honesty.** On Wednesday we left church with a dirty smear on our foreheads. Ashes, the end product of burning, represent that which once was but is no more. Ashes remind us of our mortality and are symbol of the forgiving, cleansing grace of God. The symbol is deeply rooted in the faith of ancient Israel. The act of sitting in ashes and wearing the coarse fabric of burlap was a solemn declaration before God of one's personal sense of sin and mortality. When Job lost his fortune, his children, and finally his health, he sat in ashes as he mourned his loss and contemplated his future. When friends came, they threw dust on their heads and tore their clothing in sympathy with his plight and joined in penance.

In the story of Jonah, repentance begins with the King's personal response. It is followed by a public proclamation. The act of self-humiliation was especially significant when practiced by the chief executive officer. Psalm 51 is traditional reading for Ash Wednesday, recalling David's anguish over his sin of adultery and murder. Confession and penance start at the top, or, perhaps the Psalm reminds us that in the eyes of God there is no *top*. The King is without rank before the holy presence of God.

The sin of Nineveh is never clear in the story. It is assumed by God, by Jonah, by the King, and finally by the people, but it is never clearly stated for the benefit of the reader. Assyrian political and military atrocities committed against smaller, weaker nations probably lies behind the assumption. The king calls for people to repent of "evil ways" and "violence." Unlike the sexual misconduct of Clinton or Woods, no one could claim a right to privacy or family privilege. We have too easily dismissed the word *sin* as the moralistic equivalent of sex. Sin, the character flaw of the people, may more clearly describe our plight than a catalogue of sins that we can debate and dismiss. The entire city, including the animals, was ordered by proclamation to fast, to dawn sackcloth, and to repent. Somehow an entire city heard the same message and came together in honest confession.

**The Word of God is in the hearing.** Patrick Miller questions our ability to hear the call to repentance in the narcissistic age in which we live. He recalls a symbolic beginning in the late 1960's in a book by Thomas Harris, *I'm OK, You're OK*. We raised a generation of folks for whom the acknowledgment of wrong was the ultimate heresy. We do not have to grovel in guilt in order to recognize that we have taken a wrong turn in life and need to get back on track. To put it in present perspective, it was OK for Tiger Woods to say I am not OK. In therapeutic terms, if we don't know where we are, we are not likely to reach any meaningful conclusions about where we ought to be going. The evangelical term *lost* may have distorted implications for you, but denial of being "lost" is

the worst possible enemy to finding your way.

The map by the hospital elevator shows all of the exits and the routes to safety in the event of a fire, but perhaps the most important message is the arrow which notes, "you are here." We have become geniuses at avoiding responsibility for our misdeeds. With Adam, we easily point the finger of blame at someone else, "my companion made me do it!" In T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* Celia says to her psychiatrist, "I had always been taught to disbelieve in sin. . . . Anything wrong, from our point of view was either in bad form, or was psychological." The psychiatrist Karl Menninger called for our recovery of the word *sin* in our vocabulary of human behavior, and psychiatrist Scott Peck takes issue with the New Age myth that evil has no reality. He calls it "simplistic" that we can attend to the problems of our age with euphonic denial.

What an irony! Jonah preached wrath, and the people responded to grace. Could it be that the people misunderstood the sermon? Jonah spoke one sentence, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The verb translated "overthrown" suggests the destruction of the city, but Nineveh may have heard a different message. Somehow they heard a call for the city to be overturned in repentance. Someone suggested that the Ninevites could not understand good Hebrew and that the salvation of the city came as a result of a fortunate misunderstanding of Jonah's message. Truth be known, Jonah is not the main actor here. The people of Nineveh and the God of grace take center stage. Jonah's importance quickly disappears. The Word of God happens in spite of Jonah's botched message. The Word of God is in the twisted meaning, the misunderstanding.

It happens all of the time. I learned a long time ago that God has a way of getting around the stumbling words of sermons. At best, the sermon is only a catalyst. The Word of God is not equal to the words we read or speak, even from the Bible, no matter how profound or orthodox they may sound. God's Word happens in the hearing. Paul's message of divine love looks beyond the words to the character behind the words: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." In John, the Word is the person of Christ, become flesh to dwell with us. In the gospel of Christ, the Word of God is always more than words.

As we gather at the Table, hear the Word of God, the message God's grace that is spoken today in the bread and the cup of the Table, the Word of God incarnate in the taste and touch of the Table.