

On Jan. 6, as the U.S. Capitol was occupied by rioters – if not worse than rioters – Rear Adm. Margaret Grun Kibben, was beginning her third day as chaplain to the U.S. House of Representatives. She felt honored in her new assignment as the one sent by God to pray on behalf of our country’s legislators, and thus, the people of our nation. Little did she know, her ministry that day would be one of comforting terrified souls and holding quivering hands.

As the U.S. Representatives and Senators dove to the floor to shield themselves from attack, Kibben rose to the podium. “It was a matter of asking for God’s covering and a hedge of protection around us,” she said. “And that in the chaos, the spirit would descend in the room to offer us peace and order. That we would look to care for each other, even as we are under stress.”<sup>1</sup>

That was Jan. 6. Now let me take you back about 2,700 years ago, when the Prophet Jonah was sent by the word of God across the sea to pray for the people of Nineveh. They, too, were under siege, not by rioters, but by sin and wickedness. Nineveh was so bad that another prophet named Nahum called it a “bloody city all full of lies and robbery,” (Nahum 3:1), saying, “... All who see you, (Nineveh), will shrink from you and say, ‘Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?’ Where shall I seek comforters for you, Nineveh?” Nahum (3:7).

The wrath of God against Nineveh is so severe and fierce that Nahum can’t imagine anyone bringing it words of comfort or prayers for mercy. But God can. So God sends Jonah. In chapter 1, God says, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” But instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah gets on a boat going in the opposite direction, toward Tarshish. Explaining why he turned from the Lord, Jonah says in today’s scripture reading, “... I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

Jonah knew that if the Ninevites turned from their evil ways, God would change his mind and not allow the city to be destroyed. Here, we’re talking about the wrath of God verses the mercy of God. What does God do when evil walks the earth? And how should we, as God’s faithful, respond in the face of evil and how God deals with it, letting it seem to win the day sometimes, if not the battle and the war.

<sup>1</sup> Jack Jenkins, Religion News Service, January 9, 2021, retrieved January 13, 2021 at [https://religionnews.com/2021/01/09/house-chaplain-siege/?fbclid=IwAR2gvlhZLp825taf\\_TZ7OFyRnNWQF9zNKSSYI6IRp\\_NuxGnHAIPAqhXO1NI](https://religionnews.com/2021/01/09/house-chaplain-siege/?fbclid=IwAR2gvlhZLp825taf_TZ7OFyRnNWQF9zNKSSYI6IRp_NuxGnHAIPAqhXO1NI)

The answer to these age-old questions is found in the story of Jonah and his confrontation with God. Jonah is furious with God for sparing the Ninevites, so much so that he says, "... O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord says, "Is it right for you to be angry" – angry because God's judgment is not vengeful, but merciful? That's a good question. We can be a vengeful people, can't we, hellbent on seeing others suffer for their actions? And when that doesn't happen, we can get upset, just like Jonah.

Some of us get mad at God, while others quietly question God's actions, while still others lose faith in God altogether. I know that each and every one of you has struggled with this, or will sometime in your life. A horrific crime goes unpunished and we wonder where is God in all of this. Someone at school cheats and gets away with it. The lazy coworker who sails under the radar happy as a lark, while you're left to pick up the slack. Your brother or sister, spouse or housemate always leaving the heavy lifting to you when it comes to family responsibilities and weekly chores. And nobody seems to care, not even God.

That's how Jonah felt. He felt that God didn't care about him, that he might as well be dead. But God does care about Jonah – God cares about you and all people, even people who have turned away from the Lord and let wickedness take over their lives, even those who were rioting and attacking our nation's Capital, even those on the other side of the aisle from you when it comes to the most important issues facing this country right now. God cares, and yet, where is God in all of this?

As Jonah shows us, God is on the side of mercy and life, even as God allows us and all people to suffer the consequences of turning away from God, as a nation, as families, and as individuals. We see this after Jonah prays to God that his life be taken from him. After saying to God, "... It is better for me to die than to live," Jonah then goes out of the city and makes a booth or a shelter for himself, to shade him from the sun as he sits there waiting for what God will do next. Jonah just sits there stewing, even though he is shaded from the sun.

And just like God showed mercy to the Ninevites that they might turn from their evil ways and returned to the way of the Lord, God seeks to show mercy to Jonah. Rather than allow Jonah to sit there stewing (even in the shade), God reaches out to Jonah in hopes that, he too, might return to the way of the Lord, trusting in God in all things.

As scripture tells us, "The Lord appointed a bush, and made it come up over his head, to save him from his discomfort," and no discomfort from the heat, but the discomfort of stewing in his own anger. He didn't need the bush- he was already shaded by the booth. What he needed has to know that God cared about him- cared enough to send the bush.

And sure enough, after God sends the bush, scripture tells us, “Jonah was very happy about the bush,” very happy God showed how much he loved him, even though Jonah had turned away from the Lord and had become very angry with God.

So here we see things coming into focus for us. It’s not about God and the Ninevites, but rather, it’s about God and Jonah. It’s about God and us. We get mad about something that’s allowed to happen in this world, and soon it’s not as much about what happened as it is about how mad we are that God would let it happen, that God would let someone get away with it. It’s in the midst of our anger that we need God to reach out to us. And he does, if we let him.

Now, truth be told, we often refuse to turn to God amid our anger. We’d rather be angry than comforted. We’d rather be right than merciful. That is what God shows Jonah – and us – in the very next scene.

As Jonah is sitting (*Click*) there contemplating all that occurred, God appoints “a worm that attacks the bush so that it withers. When the sun rises, God prepares a sultry east wind, and the sun beats down on the head of Jonah so that he is faint and asks (again) that he might die,” saying, “It is better for me to die than to live,” because of the bush, being allowed to wither and die.

That’s twice now that Jonah has wished himself dead. First, when God showed mercy to the Ninevites and Jonah felt betrayed by God. And now when God reaches out to Jonah in the form of a miraculous bush that comes and goes, leaving Jonah to suffer the consequences of his actions, his turning away from God and going off to sulk and stew in his own misery.

God is using the bush to teach Jonah – and us – just how much God loves us, and all people – all life. God loves us so much that God is always merciful – with us and with others. God is always ready to receive us with open arms when we turn toward him – not only in the face of evil – but just as importantly when we turn to him in our hour of despair and anger, even anger at God.

For those who know and love the Lord, it’s easy to turn toward God in the face of evil. But when we think God has abandoned us and our cause, us and our family, abandoned the world we live in, it’s not so easy to turn to God, is it?

When we feel utterly abandoned, lost in our own misery, and left to the mercy of a cold, uncaring, out-of-control world, that’s the hardest time to step back from our despair and anger and move toward God. And yet, that is precisely the time when we need God the most, when we need to find peace in the love that God has for us, even if it means accepting God’s merciful judgment of others.

God understands our despair and frustration, and God knows our times of suffering. And in all of it, God wants us to know that we can always count on God's love and mercy, both for us and for the world. God did not give up on the Ninevites. God has never given up on our nation or our world. And God will never give up on you. God is always there for us, even amid the consequences of our misguided choices and actions, God is always guiding us back to the Lord.

So, the next time you're feeling abandoned, the next time you've sunk into anger and despair, remember, God is reaching out to you. And if you reach back to the Lord, God will lift you up and place you on a more faithful and peaceful path. Amen.