

## Crisis

It seems that public enemy #1 in our state these days is the fellow who pushed the wrong button last Saturday; leading us all to wonder if that gorgeous sun soaked morning was going to be our last.

Ever since then, that man has been besieged with death threats and anger.

He provoked a crisis, didn't he?

And folks who do so are often the target of those whose lives are upended by the crisis.

There's a name for crisis provokers: prophets.

I don't think it's a stretch to call the fellow who hit the wrong button a prophet.

A prophet isn't someone who predicts the future as much as someone who sees the big picture, who helps people see the dangers that await if we continue down the road we are traveling.

There are all kinds of prophets.

There are willing ones like Isaiah: "Here I am! Send me!"

There are the unwilling ones like Jonah and there are famous ones like John the Baptist.

So it's not too far off the mark to suggest that last Saturday we experienced the act of a prophet, call him perhaps, an unintentional prophet.

Because the man who pushed the wrong button in fact revealed to us the true circumstance of our situation.

That we are one push of a different button away from complete and total annihilation.

The goal of every prophet is to help us change the direction in which we are walking.

And there is this about prophets.

They usually upset the people who hear them, because prophets always provoke crisis, and no one likes a crisis.

Jonah provokes a crisis in Ninevah, announcing that the path they are walking on is leading them over a cliff.

We don't know what was facing the Ninevites, but we do know that people are experts at getting themselves into danger.

Of course, before Jonah provokes a crisis in Ninevah, God provokes a crisis in Jonah!

Jonah is the world's most uncooperative prophet.

When God tells him to go, he runs away.

Of course he does, because the Ninevites are arch-enemies of Israel and Jonah, like his countrymen, hates them.

So, to be sent on a mission to keep these arch-enemies from catastrophe, why, Jonah wants none of that!

When he runs away he gets swallowed by a whale, who vomits Jonah onto a Ninevite beach.

Then, after preaching the world's shortest — but most effective — sermon of all time, (40 days to repent or else!), lo and behold, the entire city listens, the people turn around, they change their hearts — and are saved.

The crisis Jonah provokes, works.

St. Paul too is provoking a crisis this morning among the members of his newly formed Christian community in Corinth.

Paul is a pro at provoking crises, as you know.

Whether as a Pharisee who hunted down the new Christ believers, or as the last apostle, thrown on his backside after encountering the risen Lord, this most fervent preacher of the gospel seems to have a knack for poking a stick in people's eyes.

Today, the community at Corinth is a real mess.

It's made up of Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, insiders and outsiders.

What they struggle the most with is how to trade in their old way of living, with its distinctions based on class and money and race and good looks, into this new way of living that comes to see every person, irrespective of circumstance, as a beloved child of God.

And the crisis that Paul provokes is his insistence that the old way of living is coming to an end.

You hear the urgency in Paul's voice:

"The appointed time grows short; so those who have wives be as though they've none, the mourners as though they're not mourning, the rejoicers as though they're not rejoicing, and those who deal with the world as though they've no dealings with it.

For this world is passing away!"

Did that crisis change the Corinthians?

We don't know, but the spread of the faith seems to suggest that it had its intended effect.

Which brings us to Jesus today, picking up where John the Baptist left off, encouraging folks to come to a complete stop in whatever they're doing, to take stock, to change direction.

For the Ninevites it took a barfed up reluctant prophet for folks to get the message and take it to heart.

For the Corinthians, it's a reformed Pharisee.

For the folks hearing Jesus, the outcasts and nobodies end up having the ears to hear what the big shots and holy rollers can't fathom.

The crisis Jesus provokes has its effect on some, but others not only reject the message, they reject the messenger too.

And I can't help but wondering if for us, on a gorgeous Saturday morning in Hawaii, at 8:07 AM, when we all believed a nuclear missile was careening into our lives, is that crisis enough to turn us around?

As I mentioned at the outset, word is that the poor sap who pushed the wrong button is getting death threats; and many folks have responded to this false alarm with anger, resentment and fear.

But if we take a step back, perhaps we can uncover the blessing that comes when we are confronted with this unwanted, unasked for, crisis.

What eyes might be opened, what ears unplugged, by the crisis provoked by our unnamed civil servant, this unwilling prophet?

We live in a time when nearly every expert on the subject is saying that we are now closer to nuclear war than at anytime since the Berlin Wall collapsed.

Just the other day, it was reported that the Pentagon is recommending to the White House that nuclear weapons might now be used not only if we are attacked with nuclear weapons, but even if we experience a cyber attack on our electrical grid or communications network.

Imagine, a nuclear response to computer hacking!

That's pretty sobering.

Or at least it ought to be.

Yet, how effective are we in challenging the bellicose language coming from our own nation's capital?

How deeply are we examining the many wrong turns that got us into our current situation?

Indeed, how many feel like helpless pawns being moved about on a board that we neither know nor control?

Which raises the fundamental question — who are we, why are we here, and what does the Sovereign God expect of us?

In short, how shall we react to the crisis we have all just experienced?

Perhaps the first step is rather than get angry at the fellow who forced us to look clearly at our present reality, that we instead face up to our own capacity for evil, even though we dress it up in the fine clothing of patriotism or the economy or even love of family.

We are the world's sole superpower, with enough weapons to destroy all life many times over.

And while it seems strange, the truth is that if we can summon the courage to face "our fundamental barbarism, there is once more hope for civilization, because women and men of good will want more than anything to find peace.

By acknowledging our own capacity for evil, there is more than ever an incentive to change, to turn around, even to become saints, because we are naturally inclined toward the good, and not toward evil.

And there is even more.

Besides our natural inclinations, we have something infinitely greater - the grace of God, which draws us powerfully upward, to the Infinite Truth, a grace that is refused to no one who desires it." Merton, *Mysticism in the Nuclear Age*, paraphrased.

The events of last Saturday ask us: shall we simply return to business as usual, or might we take this crisis as a sign of the finger of God breaking into our world, calling us back from war and threats and belligerence, toward a future of dialog and understanding and peace?

+amen

