

Jonah 2: 1-2, 7-10 "Prophets Gone Bad" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/24/21

Jonah's prayer that we just heard seems a bit out of context as he sits in the belly of the whale. Just a few hours ago, he was sitting on the ship's deck sipping some iced tea and now, as Aldous Huxley puts it, "he's seated on the convex mound of one huge kidney." It is found in the heart of a story told around campfires to make a point, recited in Sunday School to finalize a moral, and possibly alluded to in one of the most profound poems ever shared in inaugural history. In the footsteps of Robert Frost and Maya Angelou, the uncommonly wise Amanda Gorman spoke the truth from Wednesday's podium which began, "When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade? The loss we carry. A sea we must wade. We braved the belly of the beast. We've learned that quiet isn't always peace, and the norms and notions of what "just" is... isn't always justice..." (The Hill We Climb, 1/20/21). From scripture we remember there was one who emerged from the belly of a beast. That story is ripe with moments of reckoning, with times of quiet which were anything but peaceful, and norms and notions that were just this or just that but far from the notion of justice. Whereas the literature of poetry offers one form of vibrant truth, the literature we read in the book of Jonah points to a whole different kind of truth.

Jonah's truth comes in the form of satire where the author has had a whale of a good time spinning a whopper of a tale (puns intended). The story of Jonah has not and never has been any kind of history, despite the continuous efforts of some to remind us of monster fish swallowings off the coast of Australia, mighty contemporary storms in the Mediterranean Sea, or vast ancient cities converted by wandering preachers. The proof of any of these are only found in obscure manuscripts unavailable to all but a few fundamentalist pundits. Leading

scholar John Holbert reminds us that Jonah is story in its finest form, filled with surprise and humor and pokes a sharp stick at bad prophets who've gone astray; you know, those wannabes who are called to proclaim a God of love and acceptance but instead announce that God hates everyone who is not like they are. Satire is characterized by several well-known features, but the most important is that satirical stories involve things that are too big, too fast, and too amazing to be seen in any way as true to the world that we know. Jonah is told by God to go to Nineveh, a very powerful capital city of Assyria, and Jonah says, "Nope, don't think so," and boards a ship to Tarshish in the opposite direction. The storm that hits the ship is so huge that the ship itself thinks it might break up. Yes, the ship itself has a thought. Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard, but we aren't sure if it is to save himself or the sailors. The very instant that the prophet hits the water, the storm ceases and the waves are calm, a fact that astounds the sailors, causing them to make fervent vows to God, offering sacrifices and praises. While the smoke of their sacrifice rises into the sky, Jonah drops like a stone in the depths of the sea and a "big fish" swallows him up. Fortunately for Jonah, the sea monster is more interested in swallowing than chewing so there he sits perched on that vast kidney, living among the gastric juices and recently ingested plankton for 3 days and 3 nights with no idea what to do next. Personally, I can see why that might make someone take stock of their life.

Logically, Jonah begins to pray and it is a masterpiece of fragments from several Psalms. With a name like Jonah, which means "dove," whose father Amittai was named for faithfulness, you would think the prayer would be peaceful, awe-inspiring, and faithful, but instead it is self-serving and hypocritical. While the formerly pagan sailors are now showing true loyalty to God, Jonah boasts of his accomplishments and makes false promises. He vows, "I with the voice of

thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay,” but then he never does. God knows the prayer isn’t sincere, so the big fish becomes nauseated by Jonah’s superior arrogance, and vomits out its proverbial cookies, among which is Jonah. It gives a whole new understanding to someone making you literally gag. So Jonah finds himself head over heels in the sand, covered with fish vomit, near the place he was called to go in the first place, Nineveh. It seems running from God’s call isn’t as easy as it seems. He goes about a third of the way into the city and proclaims, “In 40 days, repent or Nineveh will be destroyed.” In one of the shortest sermons in history, he becomes the most successful prophet in the entire Hebrew Bible. He turns an entire city to the ways of God, including their cows, which are heard mooing their praises to the Almighty. I wonder what that sounds like as opposed to your traditional mooing?

This would be a remarkable story on its own with headlines like, “World’s worst city repents, cows and all!” except for the fact that Jonah was furious! The prospect of worshipping in the same proximity with repulsive Ninevites is simply disgusting. He didn’t want to go in the first place, he tells God, because he knew God would be all merciful and forgiving, saving the Ninevites from destruction, and he didn’t want any part of that. Better death than a world of Ninevite friends is Jonah’s motto. It does prod the question to us all – who would you not want to see succeed? Or, maybe more to the point, who would you like to see fail, see defeated? Who would you like to see God smite? In this divisive nation we live in, the answers come all too freely for too many of us. We are even seeing it trickle down to the distribution of vaccines. I must confess I was not at all pleased to learn that a woman from another country flew into Florida, got her vaccine, and then flew back while my 94 year old mother in Oregon has been told she must wait yet again as there just aren’t enough vaccines to go around, just aren’t

enough personnel to assist, just this and just that. There is no justice in that. Jonah is not at all pleased in the salvation of Nineveh so he goes and pouts under a bush to protect his sorry head from the howling winds and blistering sun. Finally, Jonah loves something beside himself -his lovely little plant. But then a nasty worm eats the roots of the plant, it dies, and Jonah wishes he can follow that bush right into the ground. And God then springs the point: "You love a plant which you did nothing to help grow and nothing but watch it die. Shouldn't I love and have compassion on Nineveh who hardly knows right from wrong- not to mention all those cows?" The answer of course is "Yes!" God will love Nineveh, so should Jonah, so should we.

But it isn't quite that simple. We can't read the story without pondering the Jonah present in us all. The danger exists for any who claim to know God, to follow God's ways, quote scripture, pray up a storm, and even share a prophetic word or two. But then in reality and practice, we use scripture to serve our own purposes and God becomes our lap dog, brought in to affirm the narrow things we already believe. In short, the Jonah in any of us is a prophet gone bad, seeking our own interests over the well-being of others. Whenever we bristle at persons not like us, who do not sound like us or act like us, whenever we make distinctions like "they are not my people, they cannot possibly be God's people," there is Jonah. We're all the same people, there is one human family, period. The people of Israel, the sailors on the ship with their different religions, the mean people of Nineveh, even the wayward prophet – all God's people together. And just like the Frankenstein monster, Jonah keeps getting reborn to wreak havoc on the world that God has loved and redeemed.

Dr. Fred Craddock tells a story of a small boy standing before a ticket taker at the circus. He wants to go to the circus. The ticket taker says, "Son, aren't you going in?" "I don't have

any money,” the boy answered. So he stood outside consoling himself with the sounds of what was going on inside. The ticket taker, in a moment of generosity, said, “Son, come tomorrow after school, we’re having a matinee, I’ll let you in for free.” The boy couldn’t contain his excitement all the next day. Finally, the school bell rang and down to the circus grounds he ran. He stood right by the ticket taker, waiting and waiting, envisioning the thrill of going to that wonderful circus. After what seemed like forever, the ticket taker announced, “All right, boys and girls, you can go in.” The boy looked around in shock as there must have been 40 or 50 other children. The boy hung his head, turned and walked away. “The ticket taker said, “Son, aren’t you going in? It’s free.” “No,” said the boy, “I don’t think I want to now.” The truth is there is something disappointing about being told “everyone” is welcome, everyone is loved and redeemed. Yet, God didn’t give up on Jonah and God will not give up on us – even those of us who have survived the belly of the beast to escape God’s persistent call upon our lives. God will follow us to the depths of the sea and back to redeem us, so we might live as all God’s people... together.