

“What Jonah Suspected All Along”

Jonah 3:1 - 4:11
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

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On Tuesday of this past week, when I returned from my two weeks away from the church office, I asked Marie how she approached her preaching last Sunday from Jonah, chapters 1 and 2. I gathered from that brief conversation that she developed a theme, basically saying, “God’s call is a call which is persistent and which has a claim on persons even when we people prefer to run the other direction.”

I did not ask her, but she may have also said, or implied, when considering the book of Jonah, it is easy to get overly focused on that big fish. If we were playing a word association game and someone said, “Jonah,” many would respond first by saying, “Whale!”

It’s natural to think about the part of this story which says a big fish swallowed Jonah so he does not drown when thrown into the Mediterranean Sea during a storm. Some people even take that further. They so over-focus on the “big fish swallowing Jonah” that they make it a litmus test for whether or not others literally “believe” the Scriptures as dictated by God. “If you don’t believe that it literally happened – historically – then your poor soul is in deep trouble,” they say.

Over-focusing on the “big fish” part of the story and demanding that someone confess the historical, literal occurrence of Jonah’s journey takes one down a road of considerable peril: because any of us who want to insist on a literal interpretation of Jonah 1 and 2 can so easily miss the *greater* challenge of chapters 3 and 4.

Marie was on target, when preaching from those first two chapters, to focus on God’s call which can both lead and follow us, which can hound us for our own good and for God’s loving purposes. This brings us to chapters 3 and 4. Jonah goes ahead and preaches to the citizens of Nineveh, proclaiming God’s call for repentance; and when they repent of their cultural habits and violence, Jonah is sulking! The story ends with the Ninevites having repented, and Jonah *needing* to repent! How tempting it is to over-focus on the literalness of the “big fish” part-of-the-story; but when we do, we likely *fail to arrive at chapter four where we are challenged to “face the mirror” and see ourselves in the character of Jonah: personally in need of repenting and turning toward God’s mercy and love.* God, who yearned for the repentance of the people of Nineveh, now yearns and argues for the repentance of the prophet Jonah.

Jonah needed to repent! What a turn of events; and what we can learn from the honesty of this story! *It hooks us, because it’s so hard not to share Jonah’s reaction.*

Bible students who know Hebrew say that the key word in verse 11 of chapter 4 loses something in translation from Hebrew to English. When God asks Jonah about how Jonah is thinking God should react, given God’s own personality, some translations employ the word “concerned.” Others use the word “pity.” Some

who know Hebrew say the word literally means “have an attitude that causes the eye to flow” – to be moved deeply with compelling care. God is asking, “Jonah, should I not be feeling tears well up from my eyes over Nineveh’s value as my people, in addition to you/to Israel being my people?!”

Jonah is protesting that what he suspected all along was true; and he is protesting that what he suspected (which turned out to be true) was not what he wanted. He did not want God’s tears to flow over Nineveh as he wanted to think God’s tears would rightly flow over Israel. He was correct on the one count: God’s tears do flow over Israel! But apparently God’s tears also flow over other peoples! The question at the end of chapter 4 becomes, “Jonah can you ‘get on board’ with God’s tears flowing for those as different from you as the Ninevites are different from the Israelis?” And it is the question for every person who reads Jonah, including you and me, 24 or 25 (or more) centuries later.

All the challenges of our time – ecology, race, religion, population, economy, militarism – may have as a common root the challenge of living as God’s people with our differences and sharing the planet with civility, respect, compassion, and care, regardless of those differences.

Matthew (12:38-41) and Luke (11:29-32) both quote Jesus as referring to the “sign of Jonah.” Both Gospel writers have Jesus referring to himself as related to Jonah in two ways: (1) The belly of the big fish could not hold Jonah because God was going to give Jonah a renewed opportunity, so death and the tomb will not hold Jesus because God is going to give the world new life; and (2) Nineveh was called and responded to repentance, as God’s people in Jesus are also called to repentance. Here’s the interesting catch: Nowhere in the scripture does it say that the Ninevites became Israelis. Further, as Jesus preaches and lives, those who see something of God’s care, which causes God’s own eyes to tear up, may not become Christians specifically; and when that happens, how do you and I react?

Eboo Patel is 33 years old. He was born in India and was moved by his Muslim family to the United States when very young. His memoir, published in 2007, is entitled, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. In that book, Dr. Patel describes his search for a personal identity. An undergraduate student at the University of Illinois during the early 1990s, he continued various forms of community service which he had begun in high school, following the models of his parents in the United States and grandparents in India. While at the University of Illinois, in addition to volunteering at nursing homes and in public schools, he explored both radical, leftist politics *and* other faith traditions, including certain types of Judaism and Christianity.

A major experience occurred in his life when he was introduced to the ministries of the Catholic Workers. He quotes Dorothy Day, a major founder and organizer of the movement: “When we pray, answers come to us; but we know the answers, the thoughts, the ideas have come to us from God. They don’t just belong to us. The Lord lives in our thoughts.” And she wrote, “If I pray by making soup and

serving soup, I feel I'm praying by doing."

Eboo Patel comments: "Dorothy Day's view that God is the source of love, equality, and connection – and that God requires his ultimate creation – humanity – to achieve the same on earth (love, equality, connection) made sense to me in a deep place, perhaps the same place I was trying to fill when I fasted as a Muslim" (pages 52-53).

Patel did not convert to Christianity. Instead, he has become the lead organizer of an international student group, Interfaith Youth Core, for the promotion of positive, healthy (Can we say "sacred"?) pluralism.

As a person and a Christian, you or I may not know very many or any Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, very many or any Ninevites, agnostics, or atheists. And you or I may never know any or very many. But how would we react if someone encountered the witness of God's love, which we have experienced in Jesus Christ, and that person or persons did not want to become a Presbyterian, or a Christian as we understand "Christian"? Jonah sulked. He drew into himself. That's one possibility.

The Catholic Workers near the University of Illinois kept on witnessing to God's love during and after a young Muslim, born in India, learned, through their serving, about God's love so profound that tears of concern flow from God's eyes.

Do we sulk like Jonah? Or do we examine our own witness, celebrating not that Ninevites become Jews or Christians or Presbyterians, but celebrating that those different from us have their lives touched, forgiven, healed, and made new by God as ours have been? Remember the "sign of Jonah" of which Jesus spoke. Not the belly of big fish, not the bad attitude of one called to a prophetic ministry, not the stone-sealed tomb of death, can hold back God's love and power for new life, so profound that tears roll down from the eyes of God.

Chapter 4 closes with God asking Jonah that question about God's care for the Ninevites (and their animals!). We don't know Jonah's answer; but if you and I are willing for the message of Jonah to wrestle with us beyond a question of whether or not the big fish is real or symbolic, then we may find ourselves either pouting that all the world does not become Christian or Presbyterian; or we may, with trust and gladness, keep on serving the way Jesus lives: for God's new life everyday among those similar and different. We won't become Jonah ourselves; yet we can become witnesses of the "sign of Jonah" who is Jesus Christ, and we can be those witnesses with joy!

– All honor and praise be to God.