

A Whale of a Tale ~ About Loving “Them”

Sermon on the Book of Jonah

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Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

“You want to use me to save *them*?! Those nasty Ninnies???!
Better I should die now, than do that!”

The whole Book of Jonah, two biblical pages long, is a whale of a tale - an extended Jewish joke. Certainly a joke on those biblical literalists today who measure whales stomachs and estimate human survival times inside the belly of the beast. Jonah is a wisdom fable, made up by a clever Hebrew writer to make fun of his people for being so caught up in their own ethnocentric view of God, that they believed the ‘only God’ loved only them - and *should* smite their enemies. And maybe it’s a joke on the U.S. - pre-Obama - for professing exactly the same! Did you know that ancient Ninevah is called Mosul now, and its in Iraq?!

To make sense of this funny fable, its important to know that Nineva was in Babylon then, and the Israelites were captives, in exile in Babylon. So Jonah’s call to prophecy, as the bearer of very threatening news to the enemy city, offered rather poor odds of survival. I’d probably head for the sea too!

Jonah’s ‘mission impossible’ turns into a ‘disaster at sea’ story, played for laughs. When Jonah eventually, reluctantly, trudges off to Ninevah with God’s message, the most improbable thing happens: the enemy listens to God better than Jonah and the Israelites ever did. The Babylonian bad guys and their government repent and change their ways. They put their new faith into action. And so, God saves - *them*! Not what Jonah was looking for. Our Hebrew God loving ‘them’ Gentiles?! Hurrumph! Jonah was probably hoping the Ninevites would be swept out of the way by a great flood. (Note that the name Jonah - spelled in Hebrew - is Noah turned inside out. Clever storyteller, eh?)

So the enemy is converted and saved, but Jonah doesn’t celebrate with God. No, Jonah goes off to the desert to sulk. ‘Kill me now!’ he says to God, like a classic

Jewish joke - a line in a Woody Allen film. God plays with Jonah a little - giving him a shade tree and then taking it away - making the pathetic prophet feel uncomfortable and angry. Then God delivers the punch line. 'You're worried about your little place in the shade. Is that all you care about? You call me your loving God of All? And you think I'm not going to care about a whole city full of people and animals, all of whom are my heart's creation? Get out of yourself!'

So, what might the Jonah fable have to say to us today? I sure felt it resonate with the modern Middle East when I read a biblical commentator saying: "the nation of Israel, exemplified in the postures and responses of Jonah, is being warned that its narrow, bitter attitude is a rejection of the God of their fathers." The loving God who is Creator and God of *all*. Jonah isn't interested in the success of God's mission of love and peace, not if that means embracing the enemy. Jonah walks away from the opportunity to make peace with the Ninevites. He is still too angry at God for being there for the other side.

I wonder if a lot of progressive rabbis are preaching Jonah these days?

What else? The Jonah story tells of a whole nation, government and population, converting. Isn't that our hope for what is happening to the U.S. today? That the government and people of the U.S. are finally getting out of themselves? Converting from being the empire of the world, initiating wars in the name of a God whom they persisted in thinking was only on their side? Isn't our hope that the Obama-era is widening the American worldview to include Africa as brothers. Muslims as also beloved of God.

And what of us? How do we absorb the witty bite of this story into our personal and national psyche? If God really intends salvation for all people, then perhaps we are called to go and talk to our enemies. Who are we going out of our way to avoid? Where are we unwilling to go as God's emissary with a message of love and forgiveness? Who do we not want to give a chance to turn around from how they hurt us? Avoiding any uncomfortable 'calls' lately?

Who are the ninnies or Ninevites in your life and your world-view? Do you hear an irksome call to visit “them” or “her” or “him” as an ambassador of compassion? Are you able to get out of yourself - your wounded grudging place - and just go to them?

Well, maybe the hurts still feels too deep and you’ll have to spend some time sitting in the belly of the beast - stuck in your dark place - before you can head for reconciliation. After all, that is part of the story. God will persist in bugging you though, till you are ready to go.

If we believe in a loving God, in a God who is Creator of All, then ‘they’ are part of ‘us’. If God is in us and we are in God, then we need to get out of ourself and get a God’s eye view. To see how love draws us all together in common need and common cause. We are all called to be agents of forgiveness, embracing the impossible possibility that even Ninevites - and the ninnies and bullies in our lives - can change. But we must too.

God, help us to open our eyes to the ‘other’ in our life. Help us to see the world in a wide embrace, as you do. Help us to let go of our grudges and laugh at ourselves. Our hearts lighten, when we hear you laughing with us - with us All.

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