

Get Up & Go

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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The Community Church of Sebastopol - United Church of Christ

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Preacher's prerogative, I want to take a quick moment to show you-- my nice Mom surprised me this week with a new stole she made for Ordinary Time. And I know it's slightly smaller than Lady Gaga's golden brooch from the inauguration, but I do see a dove here...! Thank you to my Mom.

I.

And yes, we are in Ordinary Time, in the Season of Epiphany, "Epiphany" means "shine forth." So we do our best this season to notice, savor, and respond to God's light shining forth. And this week during the inauguration I noticed and am still savoring the way God's light shone forth in our country's new poet laureate, Amanda Gorman. Her yellow coat, blazing, the way her hands moved, her exquisite words. We notice, savor, and let us offer a response: Oh, Thank you God, for the way your spirit moves through poets. Thank you for people who can invoke hope and healing with their words, and for Ms.Gorman's lines, that "We've 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 justi-ice." Thank you God, for the medicine of poetry. Amen.

After the stormy seas of early January in our nation's capital, there seems to be a newfound sense of the dawn breaking this week. The prophet Jonah knows a bit about stormy seas, and if you think that sounds like a pun, welcome to the Book of Jonah, which is one of the most satirical books of the Bible. Our first clue that Jonah is going to be a different kind of prophet is in the first line: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai." That sounds like a good start to a prophetic book. But the irony is that "Jonah" means "dove," the bird of peace, and "Amittai" means "faithfulness"-- and as the story unfolds, Jonah's actions show us he's not interested in peace, and he is certainly not faithful to God. He's more of an accidental prophet, someone God manages to work through despite his great (and often grating) deficiencies.

You probably know this story-- how God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out for the great city to repent. But right away Jonah boards a ship that's sailing in the opposite direction, across the Mediterranean Sea to Tarshish. I know in my house, if

the parents set an expectation, and people choose to do the exact opposite of that, there are clear consequences. And so it is in this story too. God hurls a terrible storm upon the ship, and the sailors are afraid it's about to be torn apart. So they do everything they can think of, until finally they wake up Jonah and ask him what he could have done to bring this storm on? Jonah realizes he might be in trouble, and tells the captain to throw him overboard... where a large fish swallows him up, and the sea stops raging. The sailors praise God and become converts to Yahweh.

Meanwhile, our reluctant prophet languishes in the belly of the fish for three days, until he decides to recite some Psalms (I don't really hear him apologizing or realizing his mistakes, just regurgitating scriptures he's likely heard but not taken to heart), and the fish is nauseated enough to, shall we say, expel him onto dry land.

That's where our scripture reading today picks up the story. God comes to Jonah a second time, saying "Get up and go to Nineveh." And you can practically hear Jonah's eyes rolling all the way into the 21st century, like, fine, what-ever! And he goes partway into the city-- his heart isn't in it enough to go to the center of Nineveh-- and he cries out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And immediately the people are like, yeah, that's not inflammatory at all. Let's fast and wear sackcloths and pledge to move away from violence and be a peaceful people. Thanks for pointing that out to us, Jonah. The Assyrian king of Nineveh hears about the people's fast, joins them, and promises they will be peaceful followers of Yahweh from now on. God recognizes their repentance and spares the great city.

That's where our text for today ends, but the story continues, with Jonah frustrated that God isn't destroying Nineveh like he wanted God to do. Actually the Bible says that Jonah's anger burns within him so fiercely that he just wants to die. He sits down and God appoints a fig tree to grow over him and he's glad for the shade, but then God appoints a worm to eat the fig tree, so in the morning Jonah is sunburned and burning with rage again. And the whole thing ends with a question. It ends with God asking Jonah, "Why shouldn't I be concerned with the great city of Nineveh?"

II.

Everyone seems to repent in this story, and turn toward the ways of peace and following God-- the sailors repent, the Ninevites repent, the King of Nineveh repents, heck even God relents-- everyone has a change of heart, except Jonah. Why is this? What is his problem, anyway?

After sitting with the Jonah story for awhile, it has become clearer to me that the true extremist, the real bigot, the nationalist and lover of violence in this story, is our poor guy Jonah. Jonah wants the Ninevites to die-- he dislikes them because he is an Israelite and they are Assyrians. He only goes along with God's instructions after sitting inside fish guts for three days. And the satire I found amusing at first gave-way to a nauseating irony that feels a little less funny. The less funny part is the realization that Jonah must be a product of his environment, unwilling to examine his bias, and unrepentant. And if God tries without success to convert Jonah to a way of true peace and faithfulness, through a storm, a whale, witnessing others change, the bright sun, a fig tree, and a worm-- Gosh, if God can't move the needle in Jonah's heart with all those consequences, is Jonah capable of change? And why is Jonah so cut off and unable to see his own egotistical flaws in the first place?

It turns out that emotional cut-off in a social system or a family often happens as a way to reduce unbearable tension and deal with overwhelming anxiety. The Bible doesn't tell us much about Jonah's family, but if he really is a "child of faithfulness" he certainly seems far off from his family motto. Maybe his escape across the sea isn't his first time running away from a social or family commitment. He seems to be hanging out there alone, both emotionally and physically. In AA they talk about moving away to deal with problems as "doing a geographic." Could it be that Jonah is "doing a geographic" in order to separate himself from his family--or maybe even from God-- because the dynamics feel too intense, or he doesn't know how to be more differentiated without running away? We'll probably never know exactly what's going on with Jonah. But historians who study authoritarian and extremist groups, like the survivalists at Ruby Ridge and Waco, have found that groups who cut themselves off from society tend to feed off being insular. This goes along with psychologists who study social relationships-- an emotional cutoff, even though it aims to reduce tension, often has the adverse effect of making new relationships overly important. The isolated bubble becomes an echo-chamber.

And isolated bubble echo-chambers are usually not healthy!

Last Sunday night I joined a Zoom call with theologian and pastor Brian McLaren. You might remember a few years ago, our church did an all-church read of Brian McLaren's book, "We Make the Road by Walking." Anyway! There were over 700 people from all over the U.S. on this Zoom call, where Brian McLaren was talking about domestic terrorism, and the importance for Christians to think about and address extremism,

because no matter who the leaders are in our government, we have a responsibility to acknowledge and address the root causes of violent radicalization within Christianity. Anyway! On the call he said, “extremists can’t be argued out of their position, it activates their ego to try to talk to them using reason or facts.” I would dare say that Jonah is one of these people who can’t be reasoned with using logic, who thinks violence is the way to get rid of Ninevite ideas, and who’s missing curiosity about “the other.” In fact he seems quite content to “otherize” everyone else. He isolates and cuts people off in every direction. So if facts and logic don’t work, how can anyone go about trying to talk to people on the far extreme-- are there tools for reaching someone like Jonah?

It turns out that psychological theory which describes emotional cut-offs, and Brian McLaren and others who research authoritarianism in Christianity, all have pretty similar remedies. They all point to the healing power of relationship. The more “otherized” extreme groups are, by mainstream culture, the more extreme they become.

Relationship, keeping in person-to-person communication, seems to be the path forward to healing. At the risk of going too far with a pun, I might say the only ship Jonah really needs is a relation-ship. But in all seriousness, relationships among people who have differences can have a healing effect. And by person-to-person relationship, I mean, being fully yourself while being in contact with someone else and allowing them to be fully themselves. It kind of reminds me of interfaith dialogue, where you’re not trying to change the other person’s beliefs, or compromise your own, you’re simply making contact with someone of a different faith. You’re curious about who they are and what makes them think about things the way they do. In everyday relationships we can use this same principle. What this stance seems to make possible is a loosening up of the system, and a reduction in the cut-off.

One example of this is Christian Picciolini a former neo-Nazi, who left a white nationalist gang because someone got to know him and was kind to him. Now he helps people de-radicalize and exit hate groups through his organization, Free Radicals. Christian Picciolini says that arguing the facts doesn’t work with extreme groups because the reason people are usually hooked into a group like that has almost nothing to do with logic, and everything to do with sense of belonging and internal emotional pain. So in these cases, thoughtfully telling them how wrong they are doesn’t work, but if you take an interest in the person, and nurture their resilience, change can happen. One way the outsiders who make a bridge to these extremists can do so is by

being curious about their position, and asking questions like, “wow, how did you come to believe that?” and then actively listening.

So I’m just going to put it out there that cultivating person-to-person relationships is not easy. When I think about the work of relationship building in my extended family-- where there are extreme views and emotional distance for sure--it sounds nearly impossible. What will my close-in family think if I reach out to someone who’s been cut-off for years? Will they say I’m betraying them, or betraying my values because I am in touch with this person who believes in conspiracy theories? I know of someone who, whenever she’s about to send a card to a prickly person in her extended family, she does a few sit ups and pilates moves, because she says she needs to make sure to remember to have a strong backbone. She wants to be agile and ready for both the prickly person’s reaction and the reaction of her family who doesn’t like the prickly person. This is not easy work! But perhaps it’s better than running off to Tarshish. What I mean is, instead of running in the opposite direction and participating in the cut-off, facing the hard things with courage and drawing people back into relationship, is challenging, long-term work. The fruits of this labor might not be seen for another generation. But it’s also necessary work if we as a society are going to confront extremism in a meaningful way, to start with our own families and our own communities. I bet you could think of people in your family who may appear to be out on the fringes, or cut off from you, with whom you could develop a person to person relationship. If it’s someone you haven’t talked to in years, you could start with a new-year’s card, just dropping a line and letting them know what you’ve been up to lately. It might only be a few sentences long. But I do recommend some calisthenics or a walk at the beach to clear your head and support you in doing this worthy work.

IV.

So, let’s return to our question from the beginning of this sermon-- after all these missed opportunities, IS Jonah capable of change? Well, I would put it out there that God certainly seems to think so, yes. The fact that the Book of Jonah ends in a question is a sign that the dialogue isn’t finished. God asks, “Shouldn’t I be concerned with the people of Nineveh?” And I have a feeling that God keeps this question in front of Jonah’s mind, no matter how much Jonah tries to isolate himself or do a geographic or throw a tantrum under a fig tree. God keeps returning to relationship, consistently showing boundaried compassion, no matter how Jonah reacts. And even though God hasn’t yet moved Jonah’s heart to repentance, God still works through him, and the question mark at the end of the book is a symbol of their ongoing relationship. Perhaps

the question mark can somehow be comforting to us, that-- even through covid, violence, racism, and injustice-- the story of God's love for all creation goes on. God has a way of playing the long game.

Our Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman spoke on Wednesday, "there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it." May the story of Jonah inspire us to get up and go to see God's light. To be Gods light. Amen.