

Responding to the Call

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, January 21, 2024

Jonah 3:1-5, 10:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had intended to bring upon them, and God did not do it.

Mark 1:14-20:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

The other day, I was working with our dog, Keileigh, on the "come" command. I had been away for a stretch and let's just say that her response was not exactly consistent. She does have a mind of her own. The first time I called out "come" that day, she took a good look at me from a distance and took off in the opposite direction to see if her nemesis, the neighbor's cat, might be prowling in the next lot over. Thankfully, the "Nah!" response has become rare. I think the new expensive treats are helping.

I had to think of Keileigh when I reread the story of the Prophet Jonah from which we get one of our texts for today. Jonah also ran the other way when God called on him albeit for different reasons. If we have heard of Jonah, we probably associate his name with being swallowed up by a whale.¹ How do you land in the belly of a whale? Well, Jonah decided to get on the first

¹ Maybe some of you recall that Michael Packard, a lobster diver from Cape Cod, was swallowed up by a whale by accident while diving just a few years ago. Thankfully, that whale spat him right back out, feet first, after about 30 seconds or so. Packard sustained some bumps and bruises but lived to tell the tale of what it was like to be in the dark surrounded by fleshy muscle. As you can imagine, he was filled with immense gratitude and awe.

ship possible to flee in the opposite direction from where God was trying to send him. He was supposed to urge the Ninevites (near Mosul, Iraq), non-Jews and enemies as far as he was concerned, to repent. As a reminder, to repent in the biblical sense meant “to change your mind and turn around.” It’s about having your perception, your very consciousness changed and then changing your life to match this new consciousness. It’s in many ways about learning a new way to see. Jonah wanted nothing to do with making that possible for others and could not see how stuck he was in his own projections and opinions.

So, Jonah gets a chance to reflect. The ship he had boarded was caught in a dangerous storm. The crew threw all cargo overboard to lighten the ship but to no avail. Eventually, the crew had people draw sticks to see if someone on board was not in right relationship with their God. Sure enough, Jonah drew the short stick and acknowledged that he was causing all the trouble. The crew wanted to save him and kept on rowing, but things got worse. A long story made short, Jonah asked to be thrown overboard and was swallowed by the whale whom God had sent.

The whale had to live with Jonah in the belly for three days and nights,[a number of symbolic importance as we shall see later.] In this dark and deep space, Jonah began to reflect and pray and finally affirmed that it was up to God to decide to save people, not him. God was pleased that Jonah was starting to get the point and asked the whale to get Jonah precisely where he had refused to go. Becky found a fun image of the whale spitting Jonah onto the shore, arms up in the air, hurling forward covered in slime with curious animals there to witness.

However, Jonah was still a reluctant prophet who proclaimed the message of repentance but refused to change his own mind about his hosts. To his great chagrin, the people and their leaders took the message to heart, reflected, and performed rituals to embrace a spirit of humility. Jonah was furious that he pouted and complained to God under the shade of a tree, saying something: “See, I knew this was coming! You are so darn full of mercy and steadfast

love, and I don't like it one bit." God then further worked on Jonah's blind spots and need for humility of his own. As far as God is concerned, God's love and care extends not only to all of humanity but also to the animals and the land (see the ending of the *Book of Jonah*).

Interestingly, the full *Book of Jonah* is the central scripture to be read by Jews on the most important holy day of repentance and atonement – Yom Kippur. It is a reminder to everyone of having to draw the circle of God's love wider than one's own family, nation, tribe, or religion. It is a reminder of our own need to have our consciousness, our minds, and hearts, expanded and changed. Richard Rohr likes to say: "How we see is what we see." We fundamentally create our reality to a large extent through the projections, fears, and expectations which are so often "a resentment waiting to happen."² It takes us time to mature beyond our limiting reactivity. This applies to every nation or community, every religion, and every individual. Our failure to abide by this truth of God's all-embracing love is evident in the ongoing wars in our world, including in Israel-Palestine, related proxy wars, other conflicts around the world and the political polarization in our own nation. It can be evident in our own family and community relationships, and in the way we so often treat the rest of creation. I firmly believe that the *Book of Jonah* still speaks to us today.

Its message is alive in the Gospels (especially Mark, Matthew, and Luke) which incorporate the call to repent, to change our hearts and minds and to live accordingly.³ Like Jonah, the disciples are called to bring people into the circle of care and belonging, to learn how "to fish for people." Notice that Jesus is not saying to them "worship me" but "follow me." Living as a follower of Jesus is not a spectator sport. It involves following the crucified Jesus who rose again after three night and days (remember Jonah) through the cycles of dying to our old ego-based identities, allegiances, resentments, fears, and ways of taking things for granted. We are

² I think this bit of wisdom comes from Al-Alanon.

³ They also mirror how often perceived outsiders, like the Ninevites, get the message before the perceived insiders, like Jonah, do.

all invited to rise to a new identity as beloved children of God, interconnected with the rest of creation.⁴ Healing has a chance when we show up for each other in an open-hearted.

To illustrate what may be meant by such showing up, I want to refer to Rabbi Sharon Brous' amazing article entitled: "Train Yourself to Always Show Up" by.⁵ She refers to an ancient Jewish practice dating back to the post-exilic period of Jewish history of 600 BCE and further on.⁶ On a prescribed day, those who felt most stable at the time would enter the vast area of the rebuilt temple compound and walk clockwise. Those who had experienced suffering of various kinds that year and, amazingly, those who had been ostracized by the community for one reason or another, would enter the same vast circle but do so in a counterclockwise direction so different people would face each other.

The idea was that people who felt more stable could witness to the pain of others, fully knowing that they might be walking the circle in the opposite direction the next time. Those who had entered the circle from a relatively stable position were tasked with asking the other others who were walking the circle in the opposite way these questions: "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?" The ones walking in the opposite direction might answer: "My father died," or "There are so many things I never got to say to him." Or perhaps: "My partner left. I was completely blindsided." Or: "My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results."

I would add responses like: "I am heartbroken over the ways we are abusing other beings and causing climate change." Or, "I cannot bear to watch the suffering of innocent Palestinians as much as I cannot bear suffering of Israeli families worrying about loved ones taken as hostages." Or, "I feel trapped by my resentment toward my sibling." Or, "I cannot stop the

⁴ In the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew (12:38-42), we find a story in which Jesus responds to the demand of religious leaders to show more signs to prove that he is anointed by God to lead the way into a new way of being which Jesus calls the Kingdom/kingdom of God (or "heaven" as Matthew prefers). Jesus answers that the only sign that will be given will be the "Sign of Jonah" and that the Ninevites will stand up at the time of judgment and condemn them.

⁵ https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/19/opinion/religion-ancient-text-judaism.html?te=1&nl=opinion-today&emc=edit_ty_20240119.

⁶ BCE means "Before the Common Era" predates the time of Christ which Christians use to determine the counting of years. The Rabbi is drawing from midrash [Middot 2:2](#),

negative messages in my mind which tell me I don't deserve God's love." The ones who felt more stable would reply with responses like these: "May the Holy One comfort you," or "You are not alone." They would keep walking until they met the next person who was walking counterclockwise. Isn't this amazing?

Rabbi Broux identifies two key lessons from this ritual: 1. Don't isolate if you are suffering. Allow yourself to be vulnerable, step toward those who can help you hold your suffering in a tender way and allow the community to help carry your pain. Likewise, if you feel you are in a relatively stable place, show up for each other and allow yourself to have your heart broken open by the pain of another. Keep showing up to say, "Show me your pain." 2. Think beyond your tribe. Don't let your curiosity get hampered by tribalism or seeking comfort in old familiarities, a lesson Jonah needed to learn. Keep your heart which is capable of compassion open not only toward those you know but also toward those who are different from you. And keep asking those who have been ostracized in your community things like: "Tell me what happened to you? What's your story?"

In this way of approaching things, no one is disposable, no one's story is ignored, knowing that some responses may go back to a traumatizing event. We hold everyone in a spirit of care and curiosity. Isn't this amazing and counter cultural? What becomes possible when we truly committed to seeing and naming each other's pain, asking "What happened to you?" regardless of artificially erected boundaries such as religion, race, race, and so much more? I have seen so many of you risk such encounters with fellow church people! How can we extend this reach? Even this coming week, can you risk one vulnerable ask about another's suffering or share with someone else about your own? Could we extend this approach even to non-human others? Maybe this "non-human" aspect is for another sermon.

Let me return to Rabbi Broux who calls this approach the "The Amen Effect." It is a way of promising to say: "May it be so" and showing up for each other regardless of race or religion. Quite frankly, this is the world I want to live in. How about you? The prophet Jonah had to travel a long road to get there. Christ's first disciples stumbled their way forward into living this

way. I pray that we will collectively embrace a journey in which we face up to our grudges and limitations and open our hearts to God's boundless mercy in which all our suffering is received and transformed no matter who we are. Showing up to this way of life is a call we hold collectively no matter who we are or where we have been. We just each contribute according to our own specific gifts and calling. Thanks be to God for this challenge. May we meet it in our own place and time!