

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister, at First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio, January 22, 2012. With thanksgiving for Treva, John and all leaders and followers of BREAD in Columbus - People of Faith, Building Power, To Do Justice.*

## **“Defining Moments”**

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

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Let us pray: Be with us God. Quiet us. Help us to know you. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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Episcopal priest and blogger, Rick Morley raised an interesting series of questions this week. It went something like this: “Who would you NOT want to see succeed? Or, more to the point, who would you like to see fail?”<sup>i</sup> Maybe you and I have a slightly softer version: Who in your circle ends up at the bottom end of the jokes and top side of gossip? Reframed into the wonderful old biblical words the questions are even shorter: “Who would you like to see God smite?” You know – thrash, trounce, toss away?

We can hardly read a paper or sit through a television program these days without being drawn into the business of imaginary “smiting.” In a nutshell it becomes: My family, my candidate, my religion is fine, wonderful, brilliant and attractive . . . and yours of course . . . is just the opposite. If our personal lists run short, many politicians are more than happy to encourage us to take on their own personal smiting list. They have it honed down to an art form and it is contagious.

I wish I could say we keep it local, but clearly we do not. We are a global community. We send the negative themes as a shout out across the shore. Our fast, loud, impulse-sell, fear-mongering, theology of assigning back of the bus seating is alive and thriving

here and around the world. When we are not careful, something in us gets tangled up in it. None of this is new. Jonah fell prey to it as well.

His dilemma is our lingering temptation. He defined the world through his dark lenses for personal reasons. But buyer beware – Morley reminds us you and I are still swimming in Jonah’s moral soup. God wanted the people of Ninevah to have lives that were fully focused on God. God went to Jonah and asked for help. His response was less than stellar.

Jonah ran down and hopped on the first boat heading in the opposite direction. No luck though – the storm came up – and in a peculiar way Jonah demonstrated a level of compassion that I find kind of surprising given the rest of the story. Jonah chose to save the sailors on the boat. He let them know if they would toss him overboard he was pretty sure they would all be safe; God was after him, not them. They obliged and over he went. To his dismay though, God doesn’t run away from us. Jonah had a few more surprises to deal with.

When all is said and done, Jonah and his poor attitude look and smell pretty fishy, but he is no worse for wear. God is relentless – picks him up, brushes him off and once again, points Jonah in the right direction. Jonah gives no sign of regret for turning away from God the first time, but this round, in spite of what his personal views may have been, Jonah followed through – albeit less than enthusiastically. He delivers God’s ultimatum – the only hope for the Ninevite’s for life and God’s hope.

Jonah’s speech lacked heart and it was not much of a speech at that: *“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* (Jonah 3:10), but the outcome is pretty amazing. The narrator delivers the startling news to us: *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.* (Jonah 3:10). In other words, all the people (and even the animals) believed and repented!

Jonah was not a happy camper. He loathed it. Before we are too harsh on him though, think about it for a minute – wouldn't you be irritated too? Go back to where we started – Who do you want to smite? What if God told you to go save a group people you despise? You know, those people you want to have fall off the planet if they won't stop doing what annoys you ....and God says – go help them anyway. The ones you think are disagreeable...and God says – go anyway. It is possible we might also be inclined to try Jonah's way instead of God's. Have you ever tried to run from God to get your way?

First it begins with something like, “God, I think you are wrong.” (Don't you love it when you try this?) Then wait and see if God pushes back. Then comes a second argument – “But that neighbor is crazy, or this person doesn't look right or they don't believe right (or whatever) . . . and God if you won't listen . . . then fine!” And then like any good four-year old, we turn our back and we stomp away . . . some even think – ha! - I don't need to go to that church, I'll show God!

But Jonah's God is pretty hearty. A little time goes by and sure enough God fishes us out of our quandary; dries us off and once again God tells us to *go anyway*. Go talk the people you don't want to speak to . . . take care of ones you are running away from; support the poor, uplift the downtrodden and bring them back to me. In the end, even when our efforts are half-hearted, God's hope is delivered . . . even through you, even through me.

So tell me, when it's *you* on this treadmill, are you instantly happy about it or do you get steamed under the collar? Are you tempted to sulk, kick the sand and find the shade of a metaphoric fig tree and bide your time? Maybe at times it is both – we resist - then go. We harbor some feelings – then trust them back to God for care. I hope so.

The prophetic voice of Jonah is more, though, than just one prophet's tale. People around him may have also heard Jonah's story in reference to Assyria – a place of violence, torture, fear and submission to enemies. We have similar places in our world. We know of ethnic cleansing regimes; terror and atrocities; family-torn

and war-torn places; places of brokenness we can barely imagine. How horrible it must be to even wonder when going to market whether or not you might get killed in by an exploding bomb or have your children abducted and turned into soldiers or worse.

Now, place yourself in Jonah's sandals and imagine preaching a word of repentance and forgiveness to the instigators. It is sobering – offering justice and mercy for Nineveh – then and now. Only God could enter into such horror with any remnant of hope. Suddenly, jumping overboard . . . doesn't seem quite as absurd.

Jonah did not want to hear anything about any turnaround. He preached his words, then stomped off, furious with God's repentance and grace. Sin is all personal. It is also communal.

When we get started on a personal level, it may seem that offering hope to someone we don't like is diametrically different than forgiving atrocities, but I don't think so. Why, because things change one person at a time. Jonah ends up being the most successful prophet you will find and it happened even if though he didn't want the people to repent; even though Jonah did not want to be the one to usher in a message of repentance. It happened *through* Jonah, even though he gave new definition to the word "stubborn."

God's ability to seek repentance, offer forgiveness and new life is just as possible in our singular lives as well as large-scale, globe-changing events. God's goal was for Jonah to tell people to stop their wicked ways and believe. He was to go, speak, and trust God would do the rest. And it worked. There was city-wide redemption! What would that look like in Columbus, Ohio? What would that look like in our family life? What would that look like in our neighborhoods and in God's church, here together in this particular part of the body of Christ?

Could we risk being instruments of God's peace? If so, we would have to come when God calls us and go where God sends us. And in the end we would need to open our lives to expressions of holiness—in other words, seek to welcome and live into God's character—one step at a time. In essence, *we* would have to find a

way to be "*gracious . . . and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.*" (4:3) I admit this would be a remarkable challenge. Maybe it is as absurd as sitting under a dead bush, being angry that our shade is gone and complaining that the sun is hot!

On the other hand, it may be worth considering. After all, if God can be merciful to the wretched, maybe we stand a chance too. God leaves us dangling on the horns of a dilemma. First, how do we go where God leads us, when frankly, we may not want to go? And second, how do we offer mercy when we are more familiar with *justice as retribution* than we are with *justice as restoration*? "Go where I send you" and "Come and follow me" are dangerous calls – both have hooks and barbs. We are much more prone to long for punishment and vengeance than hope, forgiveness and grace . . . unless of course we are the one in need of being forgiven. There is amazing wideness in God's mercy. It shatters the cycle of shame, violence and blame. When you and I engage in our closest approximation of grace, when we do our best to offer mercy, a little of God's mercy also flows in our own direction.

God keeps calling us to new life . . . and wanting us to go out and offer it to one person and to the world. Fortunately, not only do we have Jonah and Jesus leading us, we have others closer in time, modeling prophetic witness for us; teaching others to keep atrocities from happening again; helping us find tangible ways to bring about hope and proclaim mercy.

Just last week, we remembered Martin Luther King Jr.; and there are more, including Elie Weisel, Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, Nelson Mandela, the leaders and participants in BREAD and We Believe Ohio — and so many others. In addition, three new stars on the horizon of hope: the President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and her colleague Leymah Gbowee, and Yemeni human rights activist Twakkol Karman – all recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. They are Christian and Muslim, experienced and just beginning adulthood. They stand for education, equal rights, life without gunfire and an end of starvation of body, mind and spirit.

Together they mark the year of 2011 and now 2012 as a new era. Their past, present and future work will teach us ways to reach for and achieve peace and reconciliation as they advance human rights around the globe. But the list is always expanding, even as stories are retold.

Not long ago, a seminary in Kentucky sent students to Gugulethu, South Africa. One piece of the journey included students having a chance to go to visit women infected with HIV/AIDS. One of the women they visited lived in a shanty with no plumbing, no running water and only a dirt floor - kept tidy as she could make it. As soon as they came into the house, she asked if it would be ok if she shared her story with them. She softly spoke; they listened.

She told them how she had contracted the disease, how afraid her relatives and friends were, worrying that they would catch it and of the isolation in which she lived. She spoke about the way the church had helped her find doctors and get her medications delivered. At the end of her story, as she began to shake hands and thank everyone for their witness to her, she began to cry. It took the students a minute to understand that they were being thanked for *their* Christian witness of care and compassion. In their minds, they had not given witness – they had been listening, not speaking. And then it slowly began to make sense. They had been listening for the last half hour and she had received their presence and active silence as their prophetic witness. She explained that this was the first time she had been able to tell the fullness of her story without fear of rejection, attack or further isolation from her community.

Sometimes God calls and sends prophets to go and proclaim. Sometimes God calls and sends prophets to simply be still and listen.

Prophecy has as much to do with listening as it does speaking; as much to do with going places where others refuse to go as well as proclaiming right where we are. It is offering ourselves with open ears, heart and hope whenever we have the chance. But if you open yourself to participating, be careful, if you have the courage to respond to the music of God's voice - it may change someone's life.

It may change you. Will you let Jonah's story belong only to Jonah all by himself— or will you dare to speak, or be, a word of peace in the midst of hatred or violence?

Will you leave all the world-changing to the Nobel Peace Prize winners and their circles of friends and politicians, or will you take the time to visit someone who has fallen off the radar of society, give a listening ear, hug and handshake, and help them to know they are not forgotten but are loved by a God so much bigger than all of us? Will you sign up and take part in BREAD this year?

Or will you just keep praying for that big fish to swim in your direction so you can get out of it-- this messy business of going where God asks – this messy business of taking the hard road of leading others to repent and to forgive when it would be so much easier to hold on to hate, and vengeance and anger?

You can choose to open your lips and speak a word of hope for a doomed people. You can choose to transform your prayers for smiting into prayers of love and forgiveness, even when it is difficult in your own life. You can choose to live your life in a way that points to God's love and mercy, and seek to indeed be *"gracious . . . and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."* (Jonah 4:2)

Lamenting over a dying bush in the hot sun may seem more appealing, even safer, but when God calls, find the courage and go anyway.

To God be all glory now and forevermore. Amen.

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Five Words, a Reflection on Jonah 3:1-5,10 <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1359>