

REMEMBERING JONAH

A sermon preached to the Channing Memorial Church of Newport on September 19, 2010 by the Reverend John H. Nichols

This morning I want to remind you of an ancient story that comes from a land where violence is a frequent visitor. We value the story of Jonah not just because it is ancient, but because it reflects what men and women who sought to find a better way of living have affirmed over centuries of wars, retributions and political chicaneries. This story is what others have learned from their mistakes, from their blindness and from the suffering that comes from that blindness. That is why Jonah is one of the texts used in synagogues during the Jewish High Holy Days.

In some ways Jonah is a silly story. It has a comic element, which I will exploit shamelessly. It is also a serious story, because it reminds us both of the devices and the desires of our own hearts and of the causes of hatred and violence, which we find within us as within everyone. You've all heard something about Jonah but, be aware, that I am going to dress it in contemporary garb. It will sound a little different. You might think you know where the story is going to come out, but you might be wrong.

Jonah was an average sort of guy. He worked hard all year, and he looked forward to spending two weeks with his family in their time-share condominium by the Dead Sea. But one day – just a week before his vacation – God comes to Jonah and says, “Go and warn the people of Nineveh that they are doing bad things, and if they don't clean up their act I am going to punish the whole misbegotten lot of them.”

Now why did God pick Jonah for this difficult and onerous task? Jonah wasn't a diplomat or a clergyman. He was just an average “Jonah” who had been looking forward to a couple of weeks with the family by the Dead Sea. Maybe some beach volleyball, some cookouts, kosher franks, maybe a Whale Watch, the whole ball of wax. But, we find out from other stories that the God character in this story has a habit of asking people for a level of courage or commitment they think they cannot achieve and then do. It's now Jonah's turn to be tested.

It seems that God does know the assignment of calling the Ninevites to repent will be difficult for Jonah. God knows Jonah hates the people of Nineveh. He hates them as much as any ethnic group could hate another. The Ninevites are not of his people. They are not of his religion. They are not easy to get along with, and the last time Jonah's softball team played the Ninevite Nine the pitcher struck him out four times. After the last strikeout, the pitcher did a little victory dance to enhance Jonah's humiliation.

So, if the people of Nineveh were doing something that would get them into trouble with God, Jonah thought that would be just fine and dandy. If the people of Nineveh could be visited by Divine wrath – and thoroughly whacked for their sins – well that was just lovely with Jonah. He does not trust this old softie, God, to seek fairness in the way Jonah thinks fairness should be sought.

In Jonah's world "fairness" means "I want what's mine, and if anyone offends me I want them slapped around at the very least." This character, God, is all too inclined to give people another chance. Jonah wants no part of that. Fair is fair, and Jonah thinks he knows what fair is. Jonah thinks he knows better than God what fair is. Jonah thinks that "fair" means it's payback time for Nineveh.

So Jonah defies God. Rather than participate in any mission of reconciliation, Jonah books passage on a ship going away from Nineveh in the hopes that God will forget about having asked him to save the people of Nineveh. But the ship gets caught in a storm. The sailors, who are not of Jonah's religion, are convinced that someone on board is on the "outs" with his God. So, they draw straws hoping that Fate will determine which person it is and whose god they should attempt to appease to stop the sea from rolling.

Meanwhile, Jonah is asleep in the bottom of the boat, because he doesn't particularly care what danger he has put everyone in. The sailors conclude that it is Jonah who has put them in this peril. When confronted, Jonah admits that well, yes, his god probably is angry with him and that probably has caused the storm. But, no, Jonah will not pray to his god and ask that god to forgive him, because Jonah thinks he knows better than God what is fair, and that the Ninevites deserve to be punished rather than saved.

Rather than give up the notion that his idea of justice should be imposed on the universe, Jonah will take the whole ship down with him. But then he relents and tells the sailors, "Look if you want to stop the storm, just throw me over the side of the ship and the storm will stop."

The sailors don't want to do this. The storyteller is making the point that these essentially pagan sailors are made of more compassionate stuff than the self-righteous deeply pious, pillar of religion, Jonah. At great risk to their own lives the sailors get into smaller boats and try to row the ship into calmer waters, but Jonah doesn't care whether he lives or dies or who dies trying to save his life. He would rather drown than change his fixation on what he thinks life owes him.

Finally, there being no other choice, the crewmembers do toss Jonah over the side. And the seas do become calm. Then, Jonah is swallowed into the belly of a big fish where he stays for three days. Now, it would be hard for any of us to imagine what he did in the belly of a fish for three days. He had no cell phone, no television and no video games. He couldn't receive email. The text tells us that Jonah wrote a poem

God had rescued Jonah – though he didn't deserve it – but Jonah goes on and on in this poem about what a great guy Jonah is, and what a great friend God is and what a close relationship they are going to have now that Jonah has been saved. Apparently the fish is so disgusted with this self-righteous drivel that it goes "Yuck", and according to the text the fish "vomited" Jonah up onto dry land.

Jonah is not out of the storm. The text wants us to know that the real storm is inside of Jonah. He is drunk on the idea of his own goodness. He is so tossed and turned by his sense of the injustices he thinks ought to be made right to him that he has lost all track of other people: how they feel or what they want. He doesn't know or care if they exist. The only thing that matters to him is that someone should settle the scores Jonah believes need to be settled in order that things will seem fair to Jonah. If that won't happen, he doesn't much care what else does happen.

God isn't impressed with Jonah's change of heart. But God does send him back to Nineveh to warn them that if they do not stop doing evil things, they will be punished. Not wanting to become fish food again, this time Jonah goes. But the text tells us that he never went much beyond the outskirts of the city.

His mission is half hearted to say the least. He barely walks into the city. Then, thinking there is no one around, he says in a soft quiet voice, "Uh you people wouldn't believe that God is going to punish you if you don't stop sinnin? Nah I didn't think so. Probably just a miscommunication. That's all right. Just pay no attention to me. Just go right on sinning. Don't let me stop you. I'll just go up on that hill and take a rest."

He hoped he had been a spectacular failure at prophecy and social reform. Jonah thus retired to the hillside to watch the fun. But, incredibly, someone in Nineveh heard him and believed him and went to the king, who also believed him, and proclaimed a national day of repentance. The God character in this story is so touched that the city is spared.

But Jonah is furious. He says to God, "Now you see. I knew this would happen. Where is the justice here, God? Where is the fairness? You went soft on me. I've been waiting here for forty days and forty nights to watch Nineveh get what it richly deserves, and nothing happens." Jonah was in a very bad mood. The sun was beating down on him, and he was angry.

God causes a large plant to grow over Jonah, and it gives him so much shade he begins to feel better about life and about himself. "Perhaps," he thinks, "all is not lost. Perhaps there is goodness in the world." Just when Jonah was feeling good about himself, God then caused the plant to wither and die leaving Jonah sweltering in the hot sun again and he became boiling mad.

God then speaks to Jonah. “Are you angry?” Jonah says, “Are you kidding? I am so angry I want to die, again.” Then the character God said something like this, “Think about it Jonah. You did not make this plant. It was one of Life’s good gifts to you. But you were sorry for its death only because it ceased to be of use to you. Yet you felt nothing at all for the lives of 120,000 people who were not of your family, tribe or religion.”

Interestingly enough, the story ends here. We don’t know if Jonah got the point or if his mind had been changed in any way. This may be the storyteller’s way of saying that the battle against self-righteousness never really ends. It never ends in the life of a nation. It never really ends in the life of a community, and it never really ends in your life or mine. The temptation to judge other people harshly is always there even when we think we’ve licked it.

The most obvious message of this story is that self-righteousness is the curse of humankind in every part of the world. It is not – as it claims to be -- on the side of virtue, protecting the only good people in the world. It is the enemy of life. Whenever a self-righteous attitude dismisses the wonder and complexity of any living person or people then there is an attitude that harms all life and defeats itself. Ultimately self righteousness defeats itself.

One part of the story has to do with self-righteousness but another aspect has to do with fairness. Jonah didn’t think it was fair that the Ninevites got off so easily after all their sinning. We can side with that feeling. There are many things that do seem inherently unfair. Nasty and cruel people enjoy perfect health while people who are kind and generous get struck down in the prime of their lives. It’s not fair.

It’s not fair that some parents must bury their child. It is not fair that some people are born advantaged and others disadvantaged simply by the way families and genes sort themselves out. It’s not fair that some people struggle to achieve what comes easily to others. It is not fair that people die, because they are accidentally in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We have believed in fairness since we learned it as children, and so it is difficult for us to realize there may just be an aching inequality in life itself. The playing field is never entirely level. Fairness – if it means that equal measures of good and bad luck, success and failure come to every individual—is not Life’s issue. I do not think that fairness is God’s issue either. I’m not sure that God can make everything fair, but I am sure that perfect balanced fairness is not possible.

In the story Jonah tells God, “This isn’t fair. You should punish those people.” God responds, in effect, “Jonah, it’s not about fairness. It’s about compassion.” What the story conveys is that we cannot make right all the hard things that happen to people, and we may not even be able to correct some of

the most grievous wrongs. We can be a force of compassion in the world. We can be part of the work of reconciliation in this world.

The Jewish High Holy Days or the beginning of a new UU worship year (they usually coalesce around this time) asks us this question. “What kind of person are you going to be in this New Year?” Are you going to expend precious energy bemoaning that life has not dealt you what you think you deserve. Are you going to drag old grievances into the New Year, burdening yourself and boring everybody else? Will you be part of a Greek chorus, lamenting what we already know – that the good things in life have not fallen equally upon all of us? Or will you be a source, of courage, healing and hope for others? It’s a choice that each one of us has to make.

Finally, if life is not fair, what is there to celebrate? Certainly not that we are all alone on this darkling plain where anything could happen and nobody cares. If we have learned anything meaningful from living – and if we have been open to being taught – perhaps it is this. While we live we still have more blessings than we can or ever will appreciate. Life offers us more forgiveness than we think we deserve and more power than we call upon to change things for the good of others.

Life surrounds us with people who would support us if we allowed them and with opportunities that would challenge and change us if we accepted that challenge. Fairness is not Life’s issue. And I don’t think it’s God’s issue. Life’s issue with us, or as some might say, God’s issue, is that we fully accept the gifts we have been given, and make the best use of them so that we become agents of the world’s kindness and compassion.