



First United Church of Oak Park

Jonah Through the Looking Glass

Jonah, Chapters 3 and 4

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The book of the Prophet Jonah is absolutely on the button for the world today. I read it and I feel like it is directly addressing the particular issues that we are having today, in this country, this week — how do we balance holding wrongdoers accountable for their action, on the one hand, and a thoroughgoing ethic of compassion on the other? This is a balancing of important goods. The book of Jonah is so applicable to today, but it is also filled with lively anachronistic details: a shipwreck, being swallowed by a whale, a king and his courtiers — it makes it all feel like it a fairy tale, and it is anything but. So if you'll indulge me, let me tell you this story a second time, a bit through the looking glass; call it a retelling of the book of Jonah.

The word of the Lord came to Oak Park, to Joni, daughter of Anthony. And the Lord said to Joni, “Joni, get up and go to Spokane, Washington, and proclaim against the white nationalists and white supremacists spreading hate in that place, for their wickedness has come before me.” And so Joni got up, went to the airport, and bought a one-way ticket to Miami.

But while the plane was on its way to Miami, great turbulence overtook the plane, and it shook so much that the crew feared the plane would break apart. And so they made an emergency landing in Atlanta. And when they flew out the next day from Atlanta, another storm arose, and they were diverted to Houston. And when they flew out the next day, another storm arose and they were diverted to Los Angeles. And when they flew out the next day, another storm arose and they were diverted again, making another emergency landing. Three days and three nights Joni had already been in the belly of the aircraft, and when she de-planed at last she was in ... the airport in Spokane, Washington.

And the word of the Lord came a second time, saying, “Joni, get up and go to Spokane and proclaim against the white nationalists and white supremacists spreading hate in that place, for their wickedness has come before me.” So Joni took the airport shuttle downtown, and stood in front of a crowd of white men

wearing Pepe the frog T-shirts, and hoodies that read “Six million wasn’t enough,” and signs scrawled with “Remember the 14 words.” And Joni cried out to them, “Just a little while longer and white supremacy will be overthrown!”

And ... and they believed her. The white supremacists had a change of heart. They deleted their Parler accounts and publicly apologized on Twitter for terrorizing people of color, signed up for classes on White Privilege 101, they stopped posting on 4-chan. The Proud Boys all turned themselves in to the FBI for violent acts, they got their tattoos removed that read 6MWE, they threw away their copies of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, they took down their shrines to Rittenhouse and McVeigh. The white supremacists repented in sackcloth and ashes, and so God relented from the destruction God had planned against them.

Now Joni the prophet saw all of this, and she was angry. Very angry, and she stalked outside of Spokane and sat down on a hill all alone and prayed: “This is why I didn’t want to come to Spokane in the first place! I know that you are a compassionate and gracious God, renouncing punishment. And I do not want you to renounce punishment on those white supremacists. I want to see these people suffer as they have made others suffer, is that not justice, to return like for like, is that not a balancing of the scales?” And God said, “Are you so angry?” “Yes, angry enough to prefer the paths of death to the paths of life.” And God replied, “Should I not care about those countless ones who had been led astray, who do not yet know their right hand from their left, who do not yet know right from wrong, do not yet know what is the truth and what is a lie?”

A retelling of the book of Jonah.

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Jonah falls decidedly on the “hold wrongdoers accountable” side of that scale, and I understand Jonah’s anger. Jonah was angry that wrongdoers should be given a chance to do better, rather than being stricken from the book of life. Jonah was angry that people who had made grave errors would be allowed to repair what they had done. Jonah feels anything less than writing off wrongdoers forever is letting them get away with murder!

God, for God's part, does not fall on the "forgive and forget" side of the scales, to be clear. God did not simply allow Ninevah to go right on with wickedness; the consequences of their wrongdoing were too grave. To simply allow wrongdoers to persist in doing wrong, that is not compassion, that is not forgiveness, either, that is not even grace; that is just fear. To "forgive" wrongdoers while allowing them to go right on doing what they're doing, well, that's just enabling them to continue in wrongdoing. The people of Ninevah are forgiven, but only after recognizing their error, and turning onto another path, repairing what they had done.

Because what God wants is the same thing for all people. God wants the same thing for all people, that we should live righteous lives, that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves, treat others as we would wish to be treated. This is not hard to understand! It is so simple a child can learn it, yet it is so challenging that adults get it wrong all the time.

God desires the same thing from all people. But that looks somewhat different, depending on who I am. If I am a wrongdoer, if I build my life around hate and lies and violence, what God wants for me is to change my whole life, to turn around, to be utterly different from the inside out. What God is doing is working to thwart all my plans and oppose me at every turn — for the sake of others and for my own sake as well. God's love looks like consequences and accountability and a call to do better. This is God's love for the wrongdoer, because to persist in evil twists the heart.

But for those who are righteous, who have strived to do what is good, yes, with some work that needs to be done, but who are at least on the path of what God desires, who need not to turn around but to go further. For the righteous, God desires persistence in doing good. God's love for the righteous looks like encouragement, to remain strong in seeing the best in others, and desiring the thriving of all people of good will. Because to be faithful to paths of good heals the spirit.

What God wants for me is the same thing that God wants for the leader of the Proud Boys — a righteous life. God desires from me the same thing God desires from you: that you live a righteous life, that you live in a way that your neighbor can thrive. May God love us into making that real.