



WHO KNOWS?

January 21, 2018, The Third Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-10

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When I think about the story of Jonah being saved from drowning in the chaotic waters of the sea, I am also reminded of Noah's story and the ark that saves his family and the animals from the flood. In both cases God brings saving shelter to those in mortal danger. But I believe there is another interesting parallel between the stories that is a bit more off the beaten path. There is a story in the Noah narrative, a slightly risqué story, that is often forgotten but has always intrigued me.

Naked Noah. It is the text I want preached at my memorial service, naked Noah. It is an idiosyncratic story found at the end of the Noah narrative after he and his family have returned to dry ground. Noah plants some grapes, makes some wine, and ends up intoxicated and naked in a tent where one of his sons finds him. It is one of those stories that a better editor might have eliminated. It is certainly not a biblical text that is primed for a memorial service, which was the whole point of why over 20 years ago I challenged a friend of mine to preach it at my memorial service.

But recently I have decided what was once a lark now may very well be an interesting text by which to measure someone's life. Noah is lauded for his steadfast and unquestioning obedience to God. But Rabbi Jonathan Sacks raises a very interesting set of questions.

“What does Noah say to God when the decree is issued that the world is about to perish? What does he say when he is told to make an ark to save himself and his



family? What does he say as the rain begins to fall? The answer is: nothing. During the whole sequence of events, Noah is not reported as saying a single word. Instead we read, four times, of his silent obedience.”¹

Think about some of the characters from the Old Testament. When God tells Abraham he is about to destroy Sodom, Abraham argues and bargains with him in an effort to save the city. When God tells Moses she will destroy the unfaithful nation of Israel and start over with Moses, Moses argues with God and convinces God to spare the people, and they are spared. I believe Noah is drunk in his tent because he is overwhelmed by all that has been lost. He realizes he may have been able to do so very much more if he had only asked the question we heard the Ninevites proclaim in our text from Jonah this morning. When all appeared lost and their destruction assured they asked, “Who knows?”

Unfortunately, Noah only finds the courage to ask this question in the past tense. Who knows if he could have persuaded God to spare the world? Who knows if with God’s help he might have be able to convince the world to repent of its fallen ways? Who know if he could have done so very much more? Who knows? Indeed.

The question “Who knows” looking back into the past provides a view of a landscape of regret. While the question “who knows” looking toward the future is a rallying cry for flinging ourselves into potential possibilities.

After God changes God’s mind and spares the city of Nineveh, Jonah is disconsolate. He is heartbroken that his enemies have been saved. Jonah demonstrates that he understands who God is, saying, “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...” Jonah understood enough about God to recognize how God relentlessly chooses to save us, including himself in the belly of that big fish.

But he misses a chance to ask a big question, the “who knows?” question. Who knows if God can transform the Ninevites and my people from enemies into



friends? Who knows if God can lift the enmity that has led my people to live in fear? Who knows if God can make my heart large enough to love all people? Who knows?

Jonah is a complicated and multivalent story. Two of the things it teaches us are that God is ever ready to offer mercy and grace, even when it seems impossible, and we all too often underestimate our ability to call out for such grace. We think too small. We seek to protect what is ours. We are like Noah and Jonah, protecting our own. Noah could have argued with God to try and save the world, but he chose to be obedient and silent, and save his family. Jonah could have challenged God to not just spare the repentant Ninevites, but to transform their relationship with Israel. But he chose to fester over the mercy shown his enemies. They could have done so very much more.

Like Noah and Jonah, we strive to be obediently faithful and we know some of who God is. But, also, like them, we tend to think too small. We limit ourselves, and we limit our God. May we find a way to be more like Abraham and Moses who are willing to grapple with God because their faith in God's power to transform is so strong. May we find a way to be more like the Ninevites who are willing to jump all in when the situation arises, and not only repent themselves but bring their animals in on the act. In absurd, theatrical action, dressing up every last donkey in sackcloth, they are all in on seeking God's grace. As they turn from their wickedness, they are all in on the power of God to transform everything they know, including themselves. They have set no limits on what God may choose to do for them. Who knows?

Imagine if we lived that way. If whatever obstacles were presented in our lives, we asked the question, "Who knows?" and responded to everything before us, trusting in God's gracious power to transform? Who knows what parts of ourselves that feel broken might be mended? Who knows what relationships in turmoil might be healed? Who knows what we might accomplish as a community of faith reaching out into our wider world? Who knows?



What is important to remember is that the “who knows?” question is not a mere metaphysical conceit, it creates consequences. The Ninevites do not muse on the possibility of “who knows?” and then go about what they were previously doing. They are changed by the “who knows?” question. Their lives are turned in a different direction as all passionately repent.

If we took seriously the potential for God’s powerful loving presence to change and shape our reality, what would we do? Would we stop convincing ourselves that we cannot change, that we cannot be as complete as we wish to be? Who knows? If we believed with all our hearts that God truly is “abounding in steadfast love for us” what would we do? Recognizing that we are bathed in that divine love would we find ourselves generously reflecting such love upon others? Who knows?

Who knows what would happen if we believed God the way in which the Ninevites chose to believe. The scholar Robert Alter has an alternative translation for that line about the Ninevites. Instead of “And the people of Nineveh believed God,” he translates it, “And the people of Nineveh trusted God.”² This use of the word *trusted* reminded me of a story by my friend and colleague Tom Are that I shared with you all years ago. He writes of how he has challenged his understanding of belief in God. Tom replaced the word belief with the word trust. He writes, “Trust is a better word than belief. Belief so often never gets out of our heads; trust shows up in how we live.”

Tom goes on to tell this brief story:

“We took a family trip to the Grand Canyon several summers ago. I had never been. It is amazing. The views are breath-taking. Even more than the views, there was one thing that completely took me by surprise. Did you know they have no guardrails on the Grand Canyon? You can walk right up to the edge, if you are that type. Turns out, I am not that type. It turns out that I trust gravity. I don’t believe in gravity; I trust gravity...What we trust shows up in how we live.”



What if we lived with a trust that God’s mercy and abounding steadfast love was so real and present in this world of ours that any transformation is possible? What if evil Ninevites can fall down on their knees and worship God? What if the relationships in our lives that are broken and imperfect could be made whole? What if the parts of ourselves we find the most frustrating and perplexing could be healed? What if everything that divides us, our political arguments, and age-old grudges, and complicated histories could be washed away in God’s grace? What if we could stand so resolutely together in our love for each other and for God that we could reach out across this city to bring healing and hope to all those who so desperately need it? Who knows? We just may be able to do so very much more.

Now is not the time to merely believe in God, we need to trust in God. Now is not the time to limit what God’s mercy and abounding, steadfast love is capable of accomplishing, we need to refuse to reduce the power of God in our midst.

Now is the time to ask, “Who knows?”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Sacks, Jonathan, *Covenant and Conversation, Genesis: The Book of Beginnings*, Maggid Books, United States, 2009, p. 45.

² Alter, Robert, *Strong as Death is Love*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2015, p. 150.

Fretheim, Terence, E., *The Message of Jonah*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1977.