

Awakened from Apathy

sermon digest

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Jonah 1:4-10

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People who lived in Oak Ridge in the 1990's remember the historic battle of the bell. The spin-off from the city's fiftieth anniversary celebration in 1993 was a symbol of international friendship in the form of a Japanese peace bell. The bell was cast in Japan by bell-maker Sotetetsu Iwazawa, who reduced his fee by \$42,000 (1/3) in support of the project. The controversy emerged in 1995; the *Oakridger* published twenty-five letters in opposition and forty in support of placing the bell in Oak Ridge. The City Council election replaced three sympathetic Council members with three opponents of the bell. After a lengthy battle, the International Friendship Bell was finally allowed in the park as previously decided by the Council, but the City Council locked the hammer so that it could not be rung without permission.

What was the big stew about? Some viewed the bell as an apology for the bomb. One of my colleagues in ministry objected to the support of "atheist physicists who were trying to salve their consciences." But the primary issue came down to friendship with Japan. "Remember Pearl Harbor" was still ringing too loudly in the ears of some folks to allow a symbol of peace to take its place. The same year that Oak Ridge was engaged in the battle of the bell the Los Alamos County Council turned down the offer of a Children's Peace Statue, later accepted by Sante Fe. Los Alamos remains the only nuclear facility involved in developing the atomic bomb that has not adopted a symbol of world peace.

Living in Oak Ridge the past two decades has helped my understanding of Jonah. Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria, the long-standing enemy of Jews. Its location on the Tigris River stands at the center of today's battleground. The entire book of Nahum is an oracle condemning Nineveh; and, probably to the delight of most Jews, the "great city" was totally destroyed around 612 BCE. Jonah was called to care about a people he had been taught to hate. I would admire Jonah more if he had openly expressed his resistance to God. He chose the passive-aggressive route. He chose to head in the opposite direction and to sleep through the crisis at sea.

Apathy is a form of hostility. I generally do not appreciate "bumper-sticker religion," but I recently came upon one that caught my attention: "I AM AGAINST CHURCH AND HATE." Hatred can take many forms, but probably the most devious is apathy. Like a church that hates, Jonah is an enigma. In a long line of prophets moved by compassion for God's people and sensitivity to God's will, Jonah just does not fit. He is the only prophet in the Old Testament who simply does not care, and no disease is more devastating to divine purpose than the sickness of the spirit—*apathy*. We have come to know the word from the Stoics of Greece. They believed in a god of absolute power with no compassion. They saw power and compassion as contradictory. Thus, the appropriate response of good Stoics was apathy, staying above the world of emotion and pathos.

Jonah, son of Amittai (son of truth or faithfulness) is unbelievable as a prophet of God and might better be known as an anti-prophet. Thus, the historic nature of the book is hardly a test of biblical orthodoxy. Whether the fish swallowed Jonah or Jonah the fish is irrelevant. Jonah serves as a parable, perhaps even satire, on the attitude of Israel in the face of defeat and Exile. The half-century sojourn in Babylon was something of a conversion experience for some Jews. In a foreign place they encountered the comprehensive power and presence of their God, and some found universal mercy at the heart of the Creator.

Walter Brueggemann noted the contrast between the prophetic spirit and the attitude identified with the reign of Solomon: "The Solomonic establishment embodies the loss of passion, which is the inability to care or suffer." The contrast is between faith and politics. Brueggemann calls it "the royal consciousness," apathy, the absence of compassion for the poor and the oppressed. The prophet's role is to open the sensitivity of people to engage the hurt that is around them. Considering the tears which stain the pages of Jeremiah, Jonah does not fit the deep passion of a prophet. Jeremiah made us cry, but Jonah is so ridiculous that he makes us laugh.

Who cares? Storms at sea hold a religious fascination in ancient literature. The Jews avoided the sea and seem to have viewed the waters of the Mediterranean as the primordial chaos that preceded

the order of creation. Jonah traveled by land to Joppa to find a ship. Then he assumed a route away from Ninevah by which he could escape the awareness, if not the presence, of God. Less a place than a mythical never-never land, Tarshish was the end of the earth.

Jonah is really a comical character. While everyone else is terrified of the storm, Jonah catches a nap. This is anything but the sleep of confidence and security. The pagan sailors were terrified of the storm and, "each cried to his god." Jonah sleeps the sleep of apathy, and even the pagan captain is shocked that Jonah does not seem to care. "Arise, call upon your god!" is hardly the message one would expect to be addressed to a prophet of God. Note that it is the pagan captain, not Jonah, who suggests a prayer meeting. The greater sensitivity lies with the heathen mariners, and they show a higher reverence for Jahweh after the seas are calmed than Jonah manifests at any point in the story. Jonah is so far removed from the vital core of God's purpose that he not only is indifferent to the fate of the Ninevites and the mariners, he has little regard for his own life.

Something here does not fit. People usually imitate the behavior that they attribute to the character of their god. The god Jonah chooses to imitate is apathetic, more the reflection of the political situation of Israel than the eternal character of "The LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land." In a heartless world, where innocents pay for the criminal behavior of the guilty, where children pay for adult failure, and the powerless suffer at the hands of the powerful, the church needs a vision of the God Who challenges the high and mighty. Sometimes we cannot see the world because of our lack of vision. More often we choose *not* to look in directions that make us uncomfortable.

The film was shown in church as a call to response to world hunger. The horrible effect of starvation in Africa was graphically pictured in the emaciated bodies of dying children and the skeletal bodies of the aged. One lady confronted me with the demand that we never again show such ugliness in church. To be fair, she did not say that she was against alleviating world hunger. She just did not want to see it.

Perhaps we care, but we can't bear to look. What about Haiti? The peering cameras of the media seem to prefer the sensational and the offensive, and certainly only the sadistic could take delight in viewing the suffering of the victims of disaster. While apathy calls us to turn our heads away, to refuse to look, to distance ourselves from the problem, and pretend that it is just another horror movie, the pathos of God awakens us to awareness of the pain of the world.

God cares. The whole gospel can be summed in a phrase cited in our Covenant, "God is love." God cares. We might add that familiar line from John's Gospel, "God so loved the world." In writing on *The Prophets* (II, p. 4) Rabbi Abraham Heschel introduces "The Theology of Pathos." Heschel has no interest in the sticky-sweet syrup of movies and soap operas designed to tug at the heart and substitute emotion for action. The pathos of God runs deeper: "Pathos denotes, not an idea of goodness, but a living care; not an immutable example, but an outgoing challenge, a dynamic relation between God and man; not mere feeling or passive affection, but an act or attitude composed of various spiritual elements; no mere contemplative survey of the world, but a passionate summons."

1 John 4:19: "We love because he first loved us." Compassion is a quality of character that is derived. Christian compassion does not originate with us but comes from having first been loved by God. Self-love is basic to one's ability to love someone else. Perhaps Jonah does not care about Ninevah because Jonah has little respect or love for Ninevah. Love flows from people who have known love. Emotional economics does not allow us to give away what we do not feel that we have. Prophets and churches are made from the heart out. Jonah cannot allow for God to love others because Jonah has never experienced grace.

The question is raised in Mark as the disciples awaken Jesus during the storm, "do you not care that we are perishing?" The message in the Gospels is that Jesus is lord of nature. His sleep was the sleep of a confident faith, of a clear conscience and a harmonious relationship with God. The Good Shepherd who leads his sheep beside the still waters was also the Lord over nature. The gospel of Christ is the story of the God who cares for the world.