

The Bitter Pill of Mercy
Epiphany 3B: Jonah 3.1-5, 10
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In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1956, W. H. Auden gave us a surprisingly unstuffy definition of poetry. He said a poem is a verbal contraption with a guy inside it. Isn't that great? I mean, who doesn't like contraptions, right? And, even if you're not terribly fond of guys, maybe consider it a gender neutral term, as present day usage by lots of women I know suggests it now is.

So, for Auden, an interesting poem presents two basic questions. The first is technical. It's about the contraption itself. How does it work? How was it put together and what are its component parts? That kind of stuff.

But he said the second question is essentially moral. "What kind of a guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? His notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?"

I love the thought of all those earnest Oxford dons having a much foggier notion of what Auden was talking about than did, say, one of their children, off in a corner of the hall with a tin race car, imagining herself into the driver's seat, turning the speeding contraption out of harm's way with the tiny steering wheel that so pleasingly moves the toy's wheels back and forth. That's how a poem ought to be read. From within. Maybe that's how scripture ought to be experienced as well.

Jonah is not a poem, although there are poems in the Bible that are much longer than the book of Jonah. But Jonah is a verbal contraption. With a guy inside it. And I've been a little obsessed all week with what kind of guy this Jonah character is. I'm a little worried that, for all the wild difference between the contraptions we inhabit, Jonah, the guy, is someone I recognize all too well.

The book is short, but the lectionary lifts what are frankly a few of the least interesting verses in the story for us to read this morning. It helps to back up even just one verse, which reads, "Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."

It does add a little color to realize that when God told Jonah to "Get up," he was lying on the beach, having recently been thrown up by a giant fish.

It's the story up to this point, the first half, that we know by heart. Jonah being sent to Nineveh, but turning and running off to Tarshish, as if God wouldn't think to look for him there. We remember the great storm and the sailors casting lots to see who had angered the gods enough to cause it. And, of course, we remember Jonah cast overboard and then saved by being swallowed into the belly of a great fish, where he lived for three days, which should have provided space enough to consider the foolishness of his ways.

But if we have the vague sense that Jonah learned his lesson, we've stopped reading too soon. What the chapters to follow will show us is that Jonah's moral development hasn't progressed much at all when we find him on that beach, along with the rest of whatever the great fish had for lunch.

You see, Jonah's resentment wasn't just that God's proposed trip to Nineveh interrupted a holiday he'd been looking forward to in Tarshish, where he had a nonrefundable AirBNB reservation. Nineveh was the seat of the Assyrian empire that kept Jonah's people under its heel and stood for everything he'd been taught to hate.

Which means that to enter the contraption of this story and even begin to understand the guy inside it, you need to conjure people you find morally reprehensible. An enemy you despise. I'll give you a minute. I realize you're all sweet Christian people and so no one comes immediately to mind. But once you've recalled a few of those horrible folks clearly enough, you need to imagine God sending you to help them.

But I'm afraid it gets much worse than even that. You see, after you've been belched onto the beach and sent to those reprobates for a second time, the thing that never happens in this world happens. Your sworn enemies say, "Oh my. You're right. We are as evil as you say we are. And we're going to change." The people of Nineveh repent of their ways, and when the king gets word, he does too. He covers himself with sackcloth and sits in ashes, and then decrees that everyone in the city — including the livestock, we're told — must also wear sackcloth and fast in hopes that God will relent.

Maybe it was the sight of all those hungry cows throwing ashes on their heads that did it. But God does relent. God says, "Great. Thanks. You're all forgiven."

And this is where the story actually gets interesting. And also irritating. Because Jonah gets angry at the injustice of it all. In fact, he tells God, and we get to overhear, exactly why he ran away in the first place. He says, "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

This is not a story about obedience. This is not a story about repentance or forgiveness, at least not from the perspective of the repentant or the forgiven. This is about the bitter, bitter pill that is divine mercy when it's extended to the ones we've grown used to hating. This is a story about a familiar human addiction to retribution.

You see, Jonah hasn't really changed at all, three days in a fish notwithstanding. He did obey finally. He delivered the message God gave him to deliver. But Jonah's identity remains bound deeply to his hatred of Ninevites. If they didn't exist as the emblem of everything he was opposed to, the image of everything he was not... who would he be?

The bizarre scene of cattle and people alike repenting might be a more essential component in this story than the fish. Because, unlikely as it is that people actually change their ways, the Ninevites are the foil for our investigation of Jonah, and, by extension, our own hearts as well. Because if they hadn't repented and judgment had come...well, Jonah's addiction to his hatred of Ninevites would have gone unchallenged. But it would have been just as damagingly alive. And his need for retribution is what becomes a rejection of God because of who God is. Jonah separates himself from God because God is merciful. And this rejection and separation is what this whole contraption of a story is built to expose in you and in me.

"I'd rather die," Jonah says to God after all that, "than live in a universe where that kind of people can get away with being that kind of people."

And, in a sense, he does. Something in Jonah dies, or refuses the offer of resurrection and stays dead. Jonah clings to his need for retribution, which ends up being a far more damaging rejection of God than fleeing to Tarshish.

The story ends with Jonah sitting alone, outside the city, stewing. Insisting to the God that he resentfully described as gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love...that he has no use for a God like that. He thinks what he wants is justice. But what we see is that his resentment, his

hatred, his need for his enemies to pay are all more precious to him than his need to be in relationship with God. And so Jonah withers like the little bush that was sent to give him shade for a day.

Friends, I know you've been told the God of the so called Old Testament is too violent and capricious to be trusted. But I have a growing hunch that this God is still far too merciful for us to abide. I know who in this world I believe need to pay dearly for their wrongs. I'm as adept as Jonah at nursing a resentment as soon as I've been miraculously delivered to another day.

And what the story of Jonah finally presses uncomfortably upon us is that our hates can be more precious to us, not only than our loves, but than our God.

Forgive me if I've read it to you before in some other context. But I'll leave you with one of my favorite verbal contraptions on these matters. It's by a Greek Orthodox poet named Scott Cairns. The speaker is God, commenting on the nature of your prayers. The guy inside the contraption, I'd suggest, is you, to whom the poem is addressed.

Your petitions—though they continue to bear
just the one signature—have been duly recorded.
Your anxieties—despite their constant,

relatively narrow scope and inadvertent
entertainment value—nonetheless serve
to bring your person vividly to mind.

Your repentance—all but obscured beneath
a burgeoning, yellow fog of frankly more
conspicuous resentment—is sufficient.

Your intermittent concern for the sick,
the suffering, the needy poor is sometimes
recognizable to me, if not to them.

Your angers, your zeal, your lipsmackingly
righteous indignation toward the many
whose habits and sympathies offend you—

these must burn away before you'll apprehend
how near I am, with what fervor I adore
precisely these, the several who rouse your passions.*

The hope buried in the heartbreaking story of Jonah is that it asks us whom it would hurt us to see forgiven. And it asks us to see the mercy of God extending to them, not only for their sake, but for ours. For opening yourself to the One who so fervently adores precisely these, is to apprehend just how near that fervent love has also always been to you.

* Scott Cairns, "Possible Answers to Prayer" from *Philokalia: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright 2002.