**The Creative Power of the Prophetic Parable**

**A sermon on Jonah 3:11-4:10 by Rev. Ann Gibbs**

Jonah is small book that offers deep insight into the character of God and calls us to question the vagaries in our own. It does so through comical twists and contrasts and unlikely characters: a giant fish that swallows a small minded man and a small worm that overnight devours a giant shrub; pagan fishermen who worship God while God’s prophet runs away; and an entire heathen city, humans and animals alike, who cover themselves in sackcloth and sit ashes before God while God’s prophet wraps himself in a mantle of wrath and raises his voice in petty anger. It is a story of mercy and compassion and more. It is a tale with power to work at us and in us.

This is the power of prophetic parable, and while not unique to Jonah it is an aspect of this prophetic work that is often overlooked. In her article, *Beyond Messages,* Barbara Green notes that “parables are fictive not factual.” Beyond offering simplistic messages or trite teachings, parables engage our imaginations. They can confront us with our hypocrisy as when the prophet Nathan uses a parable to confront King David over his abuse of power. They are an art form that stretch us “beyond where we started and show us a world that we can aspire to enter,” Jesus does with his kingdom parables. We can read them over and over again and walk away each time having discovered something new.

I have never been thrown into a raging sea by penitent fishermen; but I have felt battered by others’ anxieties. I’ve felt cast adrift in a sea of choices and longed for something sure to catch ahold of to catch hold of me.

I will not tell you that I know what it’s like to be swallowed by a great fish; but I know there have been days I have been swallowed by regret, eaten with worry, consumed with grief.

I have never walked through a nation’s capital calling for repentance, but I stand in support of those who have done so: students across the world crying because we are at a global tipping point; black men, women, and children marching to declare their lives matter- a point no human should have to make; the poor people’s campaign in the face wealth disparity. The prophets march on.

I *have* lamented in a lean to and bitched under a bush. I have called on God’s mercy and compassion for myself and joyfully been ready for them to be denied to others. I have been irritated even angry over the loss of something that cost me little or nothing and failed to value dignities and beauty of others that mean everything or to honor the creation that God has poured millennia into fashioning.

My life is nothing like the fantastical tale of Jonah, and yet it reads me as much as I read it. Its characters and moments provide windows *and* doors into my own consciousness and probe at those things about myself I try to keep buried.

This is the power of the prophetic parable, which entreats, yea demands not only that I converse with my own heart but also with the heart of God, that I pay attention to my world at a deeper level than my usual preoccupation with those things that only affect me.

Wendell Berryhas book called *A Timbered Choir* filled with what Berry calls “Sabbath poems” as they came to him as a result of his Sunday walks in the woods near his home. The power of Wendell Berry’s work comes from “paying attention to the things he sees: warblers, trees, field, light” and these become doors to other things: grief, love, amazement, blessing.”

2020 has been the year of the devouring worm that is COVID. As it has wound its way around the world and this nation, I have discovered comfort and hope in planting seeds and watching them grow. I’ve discovered that a few little packets of seeds provide more plants than my small yard can hold; and having nurtured them from seedlings, I couldn’t bear to throw them away, so I gave baby plants to neighbors and strangers. I also discovered that my little plants, when grown, provided way more produce than I could consume; so I’ve given away bags of vegetables to friends, neighbors, and strangers. My most exciting plant is the over 30-foot pumpkin vine that I didn’t plant. It has wound its way over, around, and through pots of herbs, rose bushes, beans, and my fence, so that I’ve found pumpkins hidden among wildflowers and behind pots. While the news has been filled daily with disease and death tolls, my yard which I have dubbed the Garden of Weedin’ has teamed with life. And it’s caused me to engage in the lives of others. I have lived in my house over eight years, and it’s only now that I am getting to know my neighbors. My eyes are opening not only to the diversity within my yard but also my neighborhood. I do not have a wilderness to traverse in prayer, but I have city blocks and when my eyes see and my ears hear God shows me something each day. Cucumbers become conduits for conversation. Tomatoes transform into teaching neighborhood children about gardening. Walks with my dog become living prayers of hope and blessing for the people all around me.

“I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy.” Jonah yells this at God. And it’s an odd thing, when you think about it, for a man who has recently been saved by that same God to be upset about. But Jonah is not alone. The book of Numbers tells of an encounter between Moses and God in which Moses is railing at God. “Did I conceive all this people?” Moses asks. “Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?” (Num 11:12)

What is hidden in Jonah and revealed in Numbers is that God embodies love, compassion, and mercy. Indeed, in Hebrew one word for compassion is rooted in the word for “bosom” as a mother holds her child close to her chest. Another is rooted in the action of covering, as when a mother hen covers her chicks or like the Spirit of God at creation who broods over the waters ready to give life. And my favorite, “mercy” is tied to the word “womb”. God tells Jonah not simply that God has pity for God’s creatures but a womb for them. God has the power and innate desire to keep creating and shaping new life; repurposing the tatters, dusting off the ashes and blessing anew.

As the Psalmist proclaims, “Wonderful are your works that I know very well. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me. How weighty are your thoughts, O God. How vast the sum of them!” (Psalm 139) We cling to a God who blows our minds with awesomeness, an awesomeness we can only imagine and even there fall short. We know this because, like Jonah and Moses, this Psalmist with his next breath prays that God would kill the wicked. As if the same Magnanimous Love that formed him didn’t also fashion those he loathes. We hunger and thirst for love, compassion, patience, mercy, and forgiveness for ourselves and yet often struggle when they reach beyond us because God displays them at a level that is unfathomable to us.

Jonah does not offer us a teaching we can tie up with a nice bow. It is a parable that makes us question our values, morals, and integrity. It even ends with a question. “Can’t I pity?” God asks. “Can’t I have more life in store for these people (and animals!) than what you would give? Can’t I want more and keep creating more? Do you think my womb is only big enough for one? I, who birthed the universe?”

If we get these questions from the parable of Jonah, then turning to the gospel we get even more from Christ. While God’s compassionate, always creating new possibilities being will always be more than we can grasp, Jesus encourages us to try- to keep reaching for where God’s Spirit is brooding within us calling us to greater empathy, compassion, kindness, love. Embodying these is not passive- these are not emotions to simply sit with. Embodying means action, it means asking more of ourselves and others. Am I more concerned with my own comfort than another’s? Am I more worried about the freedoms I enjoy than those who have those same freedoms denied them? Do I become angry when I become uncomfortable at an inconvenience and protest the anger of others which comes from deep hurt, pain, or systemic evil?

Through Jesus compassion is transformed into commission. He challenges his disciples to pay attention and to notice the needs of those around them, to respond, to serve, to heal. To climb out from the bushes and buildings and systems they retreat to again and again grumbling about the world around them, and to march forward as participants in the creative acts of healing and liberation God is already doing.