

January 24, 2021 The Third Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Jonah 3:1-10

“Who Knows?”

Douglas T. King

When I think about the story of Jonah being saved from drowning in the chaotic waters of the sea I am 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 their 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 twenty 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 often lauded for his steadfast and unquestioning obedience to God, as well he should be.

However, 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." (Sacks, p. 45)

Think about some of the characters from the Old Testament. When God tells Abraham they are about to destroy Sodom, Abraham argues and bargains with them in an effort to save the city. When God tells Moses they 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 intoxicated 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, I believe 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 been 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 repeatedly 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. It teaches us 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. He was faithful but could he have been more bold in his faith? 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. Perhaps 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 fashion, 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 thus 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 healed, 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; upon those whom we never before thought we could love? Who knows?

On this Sunday as we ordain and install new officers; in this time in our country when division and strife threaten to tear us apart; in these days when the pandemic has caused us to shrink down our expectations in all sorts of ways; there is perhaps no better time to lean into this question. Who knows?

We, as the church, are called to ask this question all of the time. Ladue Chapel has a remarkable history of faithfulness and stands upon a strong legacy of being a vibrant congregation. But this does not preclude us from growing in new ways in the future. In fact, our rich heritage puts all the more onus upon us to continue to build upon this impressive foundation in new ways that we may strengthen who we are together for the generations to come.

So as we look to our future as members of this congregation; as officers of this church; as followers of Jesus Christ; let us be bold enough and faithful enough to ask the question, “Who knows?” Who knows what God may do? In a time in our nation when it feels like we are torn asunder, “who knows what God may do?” In a time when it feels as if we are trapped in isolation for eternity, “who knows what God may do?” In a time when we think we already know all of the ways to be the church; to care for each other; to worship together; to serve others; to learn together; to fellowship together; who knows what God may do?

All we can say for certain is that underestimating what God may do is never the right answer. Whatever in our lives, in our church, in our nation that may feel unsolvable, let us turn toward our God and ask the question, "Who knows?"

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sack, Jonathan, *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis*,

Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union, New Milford, CT, 2009.