

Holy Ground

Vol. 35, No. 1 • Spring 2023

A quarterly reflection on
the contemplative life



SO GOD TELLS JONAH TO GO VISIT THE
POET, RUMI, AND HELP HIM OPEN A
GUEST HOUSE... —————

Greetings!

I hope you are well and thriving in this green and juicy season of new life. I think of you fondly and wonder how things are going in your life. Is there sorrow or hope, exuberance or weariness? Maybe you are unwell and struggling with some trouble. Maybe you are laughing and doing what you love. Take a moment to go into your heart and see what is going on in there. Take a deep breath. Be still and take a look.

In the early morning quiet I have been turning to the Sufi poet, Rumi, to ponder the wisdom in one of his most beloved poems.

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness, some
momentary awareness
comes as an unexpected visitor.*

Welcome and entertain them all!

*Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep
your house empty of its furniture.*

*Still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some
new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the
malice—
Meet them at the door laughing and
invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Rumi reminds me of Jesus, turning everything upside down in one of his parables or descriptions of the realm of God. We are supposed to welcome these unruly, disturbing, nasty, scary, feelings and thoughts! We want to get rid of them, to deny, to push away, to bury those thoughts and feelings by getting and spending, eating, drinking, sleeping – anything to not have to feel them.

Our minds are programmed to be error avoidant. “Don’t make mistakes. You

could get in trouble.” This is how we protect ourselves. Our minds are also programmed to remember our negative experiences and quickly lose memory of the positive.



Among its many functions, part of our brains is a sticky web of memories, fantasy, feelings and thoughts. Early on in this ministry, when we had a hermitage, I learned that something was always trying to invade Holy Ground – the space set apart for holy activity, reverence, and devotion. In the cabin out in the pasture on the shore of a lake, it was mice, a snake, even a duck, not to mention the spiders, crickets, and determined Virginia creeper vines that were getting in my hermitage. I learned from these unruly guests that one must keep reclaiming the interior and the outer spaces for our attention to Holiness. Some critter was always trying to crawl over the windowsill or slither under the door. I

would fight those invaders, sweeping down cobwebs. I hoped and prayed the harmless black snake would not show himself when there were guests. I read up on ways to keep the mice away. In the end nothing really worked.

I had yet to come across Rumi, who says, “Leave the door wide open! These varmints are teachers.” And they were. However, I was a slow student and still am.

When worries, fears, and sorrows crowd our holy inner space, we suffer and naturally try to push them away. In contrast Rumi says. “Oh, hello there, Depression, have a seat! Welcome, Anger and Resentment. Oh, Envy, make yourself at home!”

As I read the news, listen to those around me, and consider myself, I believe more and more that as individuals, communities and nations, we are our own worst enemies. It is such a relief to scapegoat and blame others for our unhappiness and escape any personal responsibility for the way things are or are not. We choose not to expand our conscious awareness to enlarge and encompass more reality – to say, yes, we are lonely and isolated, yes we are afraid



sometimes, yes this is the way humans are. We make big mistakes. We are selfish. We have anxiety and all kinds of negative thoughts and feelings. We become mentally ill sometimes. Aggression, bullying, violence and war are sad and tragic failures of the human resources of cognitive, emotional, spiritual maturity and intelligence. Will I make room in my guest house for all of these conflicting, messy realities? Or will I shrink, close in on myself, and peer out to the world through a narrow tunnel?

When we choose to accept with warm hospitality the parts of ourselves we dislike – the parts which shame and scare us, belittle us and tie us in knots – an amazing thing occurs. These nasty, critical critters go into the corners of our house, curl up and fall asleep. Why? Because they have been seen, acknowledged and accepted by us.

And what have they taught or revealed to us?

Alongside pondering Rumi's Guest House in the morning, a prayer based on a text from Jonah often comes to mind: "Help me, Lover of my soul, for I do not know my right hand from my left."

You know Jonah, that reluctant, petulant prophet, who was swallowed by a whale. God sees the people of Nineveh, who are a hot mess, and tells Jonah to go there and tell the people to get a grip.

And the Word of God came to the prophet

Jonah Amittai saying to him:

Jonah Amittai rise

go to Nineveh, the great city

and cry in its ear because its hard

heart stands out before me

like an open sore.

–Translated by Jewish Biblical scholar and poet, David Rosenberg, Renowned Jewish Biblical scholar and poet

David Rosenberg believes that this fantastical story about a fish, a plant, and naïve Ninevites was written by a woman. Jonah's story was written after the fall of Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile.

The institution of official prophecy would find itself in turmoil as a result of exile, and an exaggerated backlash against the old fixture of women prophets would have been likely – and also require countering. At the same time, new schisms between elite and priestly classes would have arisen. The



educated woman, who probably wrote Jonah in its present form, nevertheless sympathizes with honest piety. She is perhaps related to ancestral women prophets, or to a male prophet held in derision (of which there were many after the nation's downfall) or even more aptly, to a family of the ruling class under criticism from religious quarters.

Rosenberg writes that this tale “is prophecy unabashedly about prophecy.” Jonah, defying God’s demanding presence, takes off in the opposite direction. He buys a one-way ticket to Tarshish. When a fierce storm sent by God pummeled the boat, it seemed sure it would take the lives of all on board. The sailors threw lots and the lot fell on Jonah who was sacrificed to the storm, at Jonah’s request in order to save the sailors’ lives.

Instead of the death he sought, Jonah wound up in the belly of a whale, as though an infant in its mother’s womb for three days. In response to his wholehearted prayer for release:
*And Jonah prayed to the Lord within the mothering fish body –
I cried out within my despair
I called to God and God answered me.
I implored the Lord within the belly of*

death itself.

*My soul was ebbing away within me...
And the Lord spoke to the fish
and it vomited Jonah out
onto dry land.*

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time and this time he obeyed and went to Nineveh. He walks for three days across the breadth of the city proclaiming to the people that they had 40 days before God would destroy them. And when God’s word carried by Jonah came to the King of Nineveh, he immediately gave orders to the people to repent of their wicked ways. The people now –

*Turn away from their hard-hearted
ways
from the grip of illusion
that frees their hands
from violence only*

Lo and behold, the people did as God and their King commanded. And God did not destroy them.

As for our comedic sendup of a prophet, Jonah, the people’s repentance and God’s mercy infuriated him. Bitter and resentful, now on the far edge of the city he sits down to sulk in the hot



sun under the scant shade of a few branches he cobbled together. Once again tells Jonah tells God that he's ready to die. Meanwhile the Lord provides a fast-growing castor oil plant with large leaves that hung over Jonah like a "cooling shadow to save him from bitterness to soothe him." Jonah felt happy once again.

However, in the night God sent a worm that ate the plant and Jonah woke in a daze and the fierce sun shone on him and he again said he wanted to die.

*And the Lord said: you
may feel compassion, may identify
with the castor-oil plant
for which you did not labor
to bring here, did not provide for its
growing into a great plant – a sudden
child of a night
yet in one night it was gone!*

*And may I not feel compassion
for Nineveh, the great city
which had grown up here with more
than a hundred and twenty thousand
men and women- all of them innocent
of knowing their right (the hand that
provides)
from their left – and likewise many,
many animals?*

The story is a caricature of self-possessed prophecy. The poet who spins the tale of Jonah is calling on men and prophets to listen to themselves self-critically. They are to divest themselves of personal desires in order to be filled with the spirit of God. Some of the prophets had become too full of themselves. Jonah needed to empty himself of his opinions, beliefs, and his quivering and querulous ego.

Rosenberg continues, "It is not the castor-oil plant that is the object lesson, but imagination itself. We have to absorb the irony of the imagery in order to grasp the emotional core – as Jonah feels kinship with the plant [which is a source of healing oil.] At this core is a mothering God (cried out to from a womblike belly) and the deity's way of speaking to poets in their own language (the language of both poetry and creation.).

We still have bitter, sulky, self-possessed prophets among us and within us, who have little compassion for the Ninevehs and other great cities and plants.

God's summon to repent, was not about punishing Nineveh but



about loving them as they were – a people overwhelmed with too many possessions with little or no idea where their help came from. God shows mercy to the wicked who have lost their bearings and orientation to the true source of life in their lives.

Rumi’s poem, *The Guest House* artfully explains the separation of the false self, our ever quivering and quibbling egos, from our deeper self, the true self, which is able to observe all this inner activity without identifying itself with unruly thoughts and feelings. This true self is the Host who receives the anxious ego with acceptance, curiosity and hospitality. This is the self who runs the guest house. In a similar way another Host, Jesus, receives us as we are and invites us into the opening, accepting, loving, forgiving, abundant realm of God.

Might we all offer such merciful and compassionate hospitality to ourselves! Blessings and love to you all.

Loretta F. Ross



This is the one hundred and thirty third issue of *Holy Ground*! We started publishing this little letter of reflections on the contemplative life about 35 years ago. This year you will find scattered in our issues photos of past events and versions of *Holy Ground* newsletter. There are some of you who may even remember that first issue, which was designed by artist and calligrapher Joyce Shupe who still lives in her magical country home near Holton, KS.

I knew from the beginning that this “outside the box” ministry needed the support and prayers of many beyond myself. You have held me accountable for this ministry of prayer and spiritual guidance. Those of you who have received spiritual guidance from the Sanctuary have taught me so much about the uniqueness, beauty and courage of the soul. I have had a front row seat at the breathtaking process of the Spirit’s transformation within people of many denominations and faith traditions. I cannot thank you enough for your honesty, vulnerability and trust.



WHAT'S AHEAD?

I have had some aches and pains since October and now I am recovering from pneumonia. Some big lessons for me here. Yes, the body does keep the score and is incapable of deceit. Yet I am encouraged and excited about the Sanctuary ministry! I am living more mindfully and trusting God more fully.

My book is now with a formatting editor, and I am ready to begin courting publishing houses and puffing up my platform with social media followers. If any of you know publishers, agents or editors, let me know and introduce me. I am excited about this book and can't wait to share it.

WATCH FOR IT!

This fall I am planning to start a little meditation group to focus on the wisdom of Jesus, Rumi, the Tao.

THE Praying Life

A BLOG ABOUT CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING

Stay current with Sanctuary news. Find worship and spiritual formation resources. Catch up on earlier editions of *Holy Ground* as well as recent ones.

Read and follow The Praying Life Blog at <http://www.theprayinglife.wordpress.com>

Find us and follow the Sanctuary and Loretta F Ross on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.

And if social media is not your thing, just email info@fromholyground.org or call 785-230-0365.

What the Sanctuary Means to Me

It is difficult to sit through a church service right now, but somehow I am here, at the hermitage. Almost spontaneously my burden was lifted, my flame rekindled. I live each day in a fallen world, and I am part of it. But coming here allows me to step into peace. The world falls away. I do not have to be of this world - I can't - it is not my home. Here is my home in the arms of the living God.

March 22, 2003, R. Lyons
From guest book notes left by visitors to the hermitage



Style changes to the newsletter over 35 years



Holy Ground is published by The Sanctuary Foundation for Prayer.

...the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:2-3

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