

Trinity United Methodist Church, Sarah Smoot guest preaching from ICWJ, 01-25-2015

Scripture Reading: Jonah 2:10-3:10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Responsive Prayer, adapted from Jonah 2:

I called to the Lord in my distress, and he answered.

I cried from the belly of Sheol, and you heard my voice.

You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea,

**And the flood surrounded me.
All your waves passed over me.**

Then I said, "I am driven from your sight.

How will I return to see your holy temple?"

The waters closed over me. The deep surrounded me.

I was cut off forever.

Yet, O Lord my God,

You lifted my life from the pit.

While my life slipped away I remembered the Lord,

and my prayer rose to your holy temple.

With cries of thanksgiving i will sacrifice to you.

Deliverance belongs to the Lord!

Amen

Song for Reflection: Wonderful Things, Ryan Corn, played & sung by Tyler Smoot

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac9mRT9aoLA>

Disclaimers before preaching:

ICWJ = Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice

When I use the word "enemy," I am remembering Jesus' call that we love our enemies

ICWJ is a non-partisan organization. The issues of worker justice are bigger than any one politician or political party. When I mention the government in this sermon, I am not advocating or disparaging any particular party.

Sermon: Jonah

What did God say to the fish? God spoke to the fish, and the fish spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. If the fish is anything like Jonah we can suppose that God said to the fish, “Look, fish, whatever you do, do not let Jonah go. He’s a scoundrel.” But the fish is not like Jonah. The narrator of Jonah’s story doesn’t have to tell us what God says to the fish; he simply tells us what the fish does. That doesn’t leave us with any questions because in the scripture, the non-human members of creation consistently obey God, and so it is throughout the Jonah story. God appoints the fish to swallow up Jonah. God appoints the vine to grow over Jonah’s head. God appoints the worm and the hot eastern wind, and each of these characters works obediently for God, doing exactly as God desires.

Jonah stands alone in his story as one who disobeys the Lord, among both the human and non-human characters. Even the non-Israelite members of the story recognize and worship the Lord. The sailors who take Jonah in convert and make offerings to the Lord, and the Ninevites, from the least to the greatest, repent and call a fast in hopes that the Lord will spare them, and all of this without any calls for conversion or repentance from the prophet Jonah.

Jonah stands out, not only among the characters of his own story, but also among the prophets. While Jonah’s resistance to God makes him different from anyone else in his own story, it is one of his only qualities that

unites him with other prophets. All the great prophets complain to the Lord, try to get God to change God's mind about something, especially about whether to call the likes of them as prophets at all, but all other prophets after arguing with God, ultimately submit to God's will. Jonah doesn't even give God the time of day. He hears the Lord's voice and scrams without a word to say about it. Jonah is silent. Even when Jonah does finally follow God's call to speak to Nineveh, he is a man of few words. He doesn't have any lengthy oracle about the atrocities of God's and Israel's enemies. He has merely one sentence for Nineveh.

Despite Jonah's rebellion and scarcity of words, though, he is the most successful of any of the Old Testament prophets. I'm hesitant to say that he's also more successful than that well-known New Testament Prophet (you know, Jesus), but if we're talking literarily rather than theologically, it's true! Jonah is absurdly successful. After his one sentence pronouncement, even the animals of Nineveh put on the sackcloth and fasting of repentance, and Jonah's success is made even more absurd by how little he wanted to achieve the outcome he inspires.

So, although Jonah is successful as a prophet, I'm certainly not suggesting that we all follow his methods as an example, and that isn't the direction the Scripture is pointing either. Rather, Jonah provides a comical look at what not to do, and his examples work for us the reader because we do have an awful lot in common with Jonah.

The book of Jonah doesn't give him any special introduction. There's no intimate moment of God saying, "I called you before you were born." No

majestic scene with seraphim and burning coals on the tongue, nor is Jonah's work for Israel's king mentioned in this story. Jonah is simply "the son of Amittai," as if to say, "Anyone can do this," and, by chapter two of the story, the reader is likely thinking, "Even I could do better than this." That's the point of the story, to be able to put ourselves in Jonah's shoes, in the prophet's shoes.

So what is God whispering in your ear? Or, what are you jumping into the sea to escape? We can all relate to Jonah's fear. Ever since our baptism God has provided us opportunities to speak for God, and we've acted on half of them at best. While speaking as an organizer of the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice, there is one key difference I want to point out, between Jonah's story and our own experience of prophecy. We do not have to prophecy alone. At the Workers' Rights Center one of the protections we remind workers of most often is the National Labor Relations Board. This agency protects workers who work collectively to improve their workplaces, whereas a worker acting alone is at risk of being fired with no legal protections. Even without an official union, the NLRB protects workers who take action together. Similarly, in the Interfaith Coalition, we don't work alone. We bring congregations together to work for a common cause. If one of us, or even the 4 of us who are staff members, were out in the streets or at the Capitol speaking alone, something would be dysfunctional about our work. So as we analyze Jonah and all the imperfections that we hold in common with him, don't imagine yourself going out alone, but rather see yourself as one voice within a community of prophetic voices.

While joining in the prophetic work and vision of ICWJ, I've noticed that prophecy doesn't come easily or naturally. We often feel small in comparison to the enemies we are called to confront. We know that the Nineveh before us is no fairy tail character. As people concerned with workers' rights, ICWJ is asking for something that has become countercultural over centuries of "pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps." Most people feel a little uneasy about just raising wages, especially to the popular number of \$15/hour. If the people just worked their way up the corporate ladder or went back to school for a degree, they'd get a better job. The Nineveh to our workers' rights is not only one governor or one political party; it's a way of seeing the world. That's something that isn't easily overthrown. Even if we are starting to work up the courage to try speaking out, we're probably worried what other people will think.

Even pastors who preach every Sunday still get nervous before they speak up for workers' rights at a rally. When I go home to my church's diverse dinner table, some of my friends applaud my work, and others are skeptics. I've been asked about the fight for 15, what do fast food workers really do to deserve that extravagant raise? Anyone could do their job. The Interfaith Coalition's response is that it isn't extravagant to expect people who work in Madison to also be able to live and eat and thrive in Madison. This is what ICWJ prophecies to our community. Still, it's hard to go home to folks who we know disagree with us. What will my sister or brother or best friend think about what I am going to publicly say? These fears are even more penetrating than the ones concerning our enemies. Rather than run

away, like Jonah, though, we could try running toward others who can help amplify our message, to work as a congregation, or as a multitude of congregations. A coalition, if you will 😊

If you had a moment to think about the questions for reflection, you will have thought about your first job. I invited you to do that hoping it would help us relate to the people whom ICWJ supports, whose voices we hope to amplify in prophecy, people in low-wage jobs. Maybe you currently work in a low-wage job. Maybe you used to. Some people will always work in low-wage jobs because there will always be needs in our society for janitors, hotel hospitality, waiters and waitresses, and agricultural workers, just to name a few. These workers deserve three meals a day, access to good health care, and savings for retirement. This is what ICWJ prophecies to our community and our government.

Prophecy is slow work, though. Often I've heard the phrase, "Some one else will see the fruits of the seeds you sow." When ICWJ accompanied workers to the governor's office to file a legal complaint that people in our city are being paid less than a living wage, we were met not with the governor, but rather one of his assistants, and when the governor did respond to the workers' complaint, as the law requires, he said, "There is no reason to believe that the wages paid the complainants are not a living wage," in other words, that \$7.25 is a living wage in Madison. While most of us who participated in the rally and complaint filing were appalled, we were not surprised at the governor's reaction. Like most prophets, we expect this work to take time.

Yet, if Jonah ran because he wasn't willing to make the time commitment to prophecy, God sure showed him. Following Jonah's exit from the fish, his story is prophecy in fast motion. Like the Bible's infomercial on prophecy, this story shows us how to make everything quick and easy. The narrator of Jonah's Technicolor infomercial laughs at Isaiah's black and white, belabored cry, "How long, O Lord?" But the Jonah story has something to offer that I've never seen in any infomercial: a vision of how radically the world can change through the work of prophecy and God's grace. We may never see results this quickly. We may not even be the ones to see the results of our work, but we believe the result to be possible and inevitable through the coming of God's kingdom. But wait! That doesn't let us off the hook from speaking prophetically for God. However dysfunctional Jonah may be, he plays a role in the conversion of the sailors on his escape route and a role in Nineveh's repentance. While the fish and vine and worm and wind all obey God without Jonah's help, the human characters in the story only respond to the Lord after their interaction with Jonah, and that's good news for us fearful prophets.

We don't have to be born into the right family or work for a king. We don't have to feel ready, and we may even have run away the first time we were called, and the second, and the third. But God will be just as creative as we are hesitant. Just look at Jonah's two calls from the Lord: The first time, "Nineveh's evil has come up before me..." and the second time, "Oh, just go and tell them what I say to you." The Lord even worked through Jonah on his escape attempt, reaching people who otherwise would not have known the

Lord, and just when it looks like Jonah will die by being abandoned at sea, God provides, of course, a giant fish, in which a person can live unharmed for 3 days, (While he thinks about what he's done!). So, Jonah's story reminds us in a flash what we know to be true over time: That the Lord is drawing all people and situations to himself, even our most scary, most stubborn enemy, even ourselves when we are at our most reluctant to work with God.

Now that sounds like a nice, happy ending with no loose ends. I bet you thought I was about to stop preaching. I'm a skeptic of happy endings, though, and apparently Jonah is, too. Just when it looks like Jonah has succeeded in his prophetic mission, and we all prepare to rejoice in Nineveh's repentance, Jonah throws a wrench in things by getting angry with God. Why does Jonah get in the way of our happy ending? As with most aspects of this story, the possibilities are numerous, and I'd love to talk to anyone afterward about this strange closing scene. Right now, however, the importance of Jonah's anger is that it stares us in the face as a mirror of our own reactions to prophecy and God's work. We've been angry at our enemy's responses to our prophetic speech, even if their response was to come to some sort of compromise or repentance. I know I'm not alone in looking skeptically at any speeches, actions, and policies of politicians with whom I disagree. I'll be reading an article thinking, this sounds good; it's a cause I support; I couldn't agree more... but what's their hidden selfish agenda?

When our enemy or opponent changes their mind it's hard for us. Now we've got to think of some new way to conceive of them, maybe as a brother or sister, as a fellow prophet. Now that we've spoken against this enemy, we can't just walk away when they change their ways. We've got to reconcile and work together. Maybe Jonah is angry now because he wasn't ready for prophecy in fast motion. Maybe he's angry because he's not ready to do reconciliation in fast motion. After the encouraging lesson that prophecy does yield fruit and that Nineveh can change its ways, Jonah's story ends with an uncomfortable reminder that the work of the prophet is not over after their prophetic speeches. Jonah is in the midst of the hard lesson that prophecy moves us beyond our personal relationship with God, and even beyond our communal relation with our church, and into relation with strangers and enemies. Jonah's story leaves us, the reader, to respond to the Lord's final, unanswered question, considering for ourselves whether we will move from the work of prophecy, into the work of reconciliation with the one who we never imagined would be reconciled to God.

Thanks be to God.

Response to the word:

In response we passed out nametags and markers to the congregation. The invitation is to write: "Ask me about _____" – inserting the issue about which they feel God calling them to prophecy. Of course anyone could become the preacher's pet by writing "Workers' Rights," but the purpose is to write something they feel passionate about. Everyone was encouraged to discuss their nametags during the fellowship following worship.