



**“Lean into God’s Dream”**  
**Scripture – The Story of Jonah**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, December 1, 2019**

Donna Hicks, an Associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University shares a story from her work. “Students from the Middle East who were living in the Boston area were taking part in a dialogue workshop. Two young men – an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian Christian – argued about the way Palestinians were treated when they attempted to make a border crossing from the West Bank into Israel. While they argued, a young Palestinian woman named Rahima sat nearly motionless and listened. Her Palestinian friend became frustrated and said to the Israeli, “If you think we’re not treated like dirt at the checkpoints, dress up as an Arab and try making the crossing yourself.”

The argument continued, and just when the facilitator was about to intervene, Rahima interrupted. The room fell silent. She looked at the Israeli, and without an ounce of judgment in her voice said, “I can see that you are having trouble believing my friend. Let me tell you a story that might help you understand what he is trying to convey.”

“When I was six years old, my grandfather told me that we were going into the Old City of Jerusalem to visit a friend whom he hadn’t seen in many years. I remember thinking that my grandfather was old, and I wondered if he wanted to see his friend for a final time. The thought made me sad, because I loved my grandfather.”

“He was a prominent member of our community in Ramallah; everyone respected him. People young and old would come to him for advice – he was the unofficial mediator. I was so proud to be his granddaughter.”

“When we approached the border crossing, a young Israeli soldier ordered my grandfather to get out of the car. I was terrified. The soldier was carrying a large gun, and I didn’t know what was happening. At one point, I saw my grandfather trying to explain something to the soldier, but the soldier accused him of lying and started yelling at him. I couldn’t believe it. I jumped out of the car, went up to the soldier and said, ‘What are you doing? Don’t you know who he is?’ As she recalled the humiliating incident, tears began to flow and she put her face in her hands and sobbed. Everyone in the workshop waited quietly.”

“Then the Israeli student told her he was sorry that she and her grandfather were forced to endure such an indignity. His voice began to tremble as he explained how difficult it was for him to hear her story. He said, ‘As an Israeli, I believe in my heart that we are good people, fighting a painful war to maintain our Jewish identity and a future for the Jewish people. I feel the righteousness of our cause. If I accept what you say, that we fight in a way that is profoundly harming you and your people, then it forces me to look at my own identity and ask, ‘Who am I? What am I doing?’ I must swallow a bitter truth: the way I have constructed my identity up to this point is causing great suffering.”<sup>1</sup>

There may be no greater existential crisis than when we are forced to see ourselves in the scorching light of day – exposing not merely our honorable attributes, but also our prejudices; not only our virtues, but also our contempt for those from other tribes.

The Book of Jonah has often been mischaracterized as a tale for children. It has been presented as a Pinocchio-like story about a man who was swallowed by a whale, spent three days pondering his predicament in the belly of the monster fish, and then was unceremoniously belched onto the shore. The point of the story is not that a supernatural miracle kept Jonah alive amid the krill and crustaceans, but rather how sparingly we draw the circle of God’s mercy.

Jonah is unlike any Hebrew prophet. The other prophets served as a mouthpiece for God, delivering a challenging message. Jonah was an insubordinate who tried to cut and run.

All of the other prophets were historical figures; the Book of Jonah is literary satire. Practically everything in the story is overdone; exaggerated to both amuse and drive home its central point. Much of Scripture is serious and sobering, but the spinner of this tale used humor to disarm his listeners so that they might hear a message that countered their natural instinct.

The Book of Jonah begins like most prophetic books – God calls Jonah to communicate the divine will. However, unlike the other prophets, Jonah is not called to address the Hebrew people. Instead, God commands Jonah to go the Israelites’ archenemy – the Assyrians. Jonah is summoned to go Nineveh, the capital city, and call them to repent of their wickedness. However, Jonah wants no part of it. Why? Not because he is hesitant to castigate the Assyrians. He would relish the chance to lambaste them for their depravity.

Then, why does Jonah try to weasel out of his calling? It’s because Jonah does not want to risk the possibility – no matter how remote – that the people might actually heed his call. Because if they repent, he knows that God will forgive them, and that is the worst possibility he can imagine. So, when God dials up Jonah and commands him to go to Nineveh, Jonah hops onto a ship sailing in the opposite direction.

Of course it is ludicrous to imagine that you can flee from God. The Hound of Heaven can track you down anywhere. In Jonah’s case, this entailed God whipping up a violent storm that threatened to capsize the ship he was sailing. Jonah felt guilty that the ship’s crew might be plunged into the watery grave on his account so he instructed the sailors to toss him into the turbulent seas. Jonah would rather drown than carry out God’s command!

However, rather than being engulfed by the raging waters, he is gulped by a great fish. Entombed in darkness for three days, Jonah prays that God will deliver him and God answers his prayer. However once he is spewed onto the shore, he discovers that God has had him deposited on the outskirts of Nineveh. You have to love God’s sense of humor.

After such a harrowing experience, we might expect Jonah to be a changed man, a zealot enthusiastic to do the will of God. However, Jonah is at best, a reluctant prophet. He fears God will be merciful to his enemy, so he does the bare minimum. His prophetic announcement is one measly sentence – “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” That’s as much as Jonah will say. And, yet, that’s all it takes. Jonah’s worst nightmare is realized. The people repent and God forgives them.

Jonah is incensed because he thinks God is too soft, too understanding, and way too forgiving. Does God not comprehend how terrible these people are?

Some of the writings in the Old Testament reveal a narrow nationalism in which the Hebrew people are valued as the chosen people of God and everyone else is something far less. On too many occasions, this nationalistic zeal served as a justification for slaughtering adversaries. Remember Jericho? The Hebrew people killed everyone in the city, “both men and women, old and young, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.”<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Jonah was written as an emphatic counter voice. God is Creator of heaven and earth, and therefore every person is a child of God. Of course, Jonah is not the only such voice. Isaiah declares that two staunch adversaries of the Hebrew people will one day become their allies. (Isaiah 19:25).

It is easy to slip into a way of thinking that imagines that *our* adversaries are *God's* adversaries. It can be very demanding to view someone unlike ourselves as a child of God. It is far easier to make them into a cardboard cutout that we can mock and disdain.

The Book of Jonah is a timely piece we need to take to heart. Within our nation and around the globe there are nationalistic movements that seek to draw stark dividing lines between “Us” and “Them.” Political leaders adroitly tap into people’s fear of the other to promote division and garner support for themselves.

The Book of Jonah counters nationalistic tendencies. It does not claim that if you simply give people the opportunity, everyone will make nice with each other. It does not declare that the Assyrians were destined to come clean. In fact, they might have told Jonah to return to his land and warn the Hebrews that the Assyrian army was on the march and it would sweep through them like a wild fire scorching everything in its path.

The Book of Jonah does not urge us to turn a blind eye to lies and greed and abuses of power and violence. God’s command to do justice requires us to resist those who have gone over to the dark side.

What the Book of Jonah does is warn against the danger of imagining that God is only on our side not the side of our adversary. Because if that is the case, the ends justify the means, and vilifying those outside of our tribe is perfectly acceptable.

While tribalism is having a strong showing these days, there is also another spirit blowing through the world. Many have a growing awareness that the things that divide us may not possess the same power as the things that unite us.

Our world is changing in terms of interfaith relationships. When the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center killed nearly 3,000 people, some blamed all Muslims and Islamic law. Hate crimes ensued and some Christian leaders refused to participate in gatherings with Muslims. However, the long term effect of 911 seems to be the opposite. People from different religious backgrounds have worked to better understand one another, to recognize what we share in common, and to form friendships. Christians participate in Ramadan Iftar dinners, Muslims attend Jewish Shabbat services, and Jews attend Christian worship. There is a growing appreciation of one another’s faiths and the basic principles we hold in common. Treating others the way we want to be treated is the path of many.

On Friday, September 17, Sandeep Dhaliwal, father of three and the first Deputy Sheriff in Houston from the Sikh community, made a routine traffic stop. He had no idea the person he pulled over was a violent criminal. As the Deputy walked back to his patrol car, the criminal ran up behind him and shot him twice in the head, then sped off. Deputy Dhaliwal was air lifted to the medical center, but did not survive.

The response of the people of Houston was overwhelming. Rather than reverting to their own tribes, people of all faiths began setting up mini memorials to the officer all over the city.

On the Tuesday following his death, the local franchise of Papa John’s pizza announced it would donate their profits from that day to the family. The response was so amazing – some people waiting in line for three hours – the franchise extended their offer through Friday. In between football practices, one of the players for the Houston Texans spent several days at Papa John’s helping make pizzas and one of the players for the Astros contributed \$10,000 to the slain deputy’s family.

On the day of the memorial service, Houston's CBS affiliate suspended all regular programs starting at 7:00 a.m. for live coverage of everything pertaining to the Sikh community and the service. The coverage continued until the hearse drove away six and a half hours later. The crowd that attended the service was estimated at 10,000, and they came from every race and religion. Numerous dignitaries were among those who attended and there were law enforcement officers representing every state in the country.

Prophetic spirituality summons us to lean into God's dream of putting people before prejudice, extending kindness rather than surrendering to fear, and seeking the common good rather than drawing a line in the sand.

May we always remember that God is not a local deity who favors our tribe against others, but rather the Creator of all that is who beckons us, challenges us, pleads with us to seek peace on earth.

#### NOTES

1. Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 107-109.
2. Joshua 6:21

### **Great Prayer of Thanksgiving – Sudie Niesen Thompson**

Eternal God, all glory belongs to you! In the beginning, when darkness covered the face of the deep, you imagined light: radiant sunbeams and shimmering stars, a sun to rule the day and moon to rule the night. You called upon light to pierce the darkness, and creation dawned.

By your Word, all things came into being – trees yielding fruit, birds exploring the skies, creeping things filling the earth, humans bearing your image. You looked upon all you had made – a world waking up to life with you – and declared it 'good.'

Time and again we failed to reflect your goodness, wandering from your ways of justice and peace. Yet, even when we turned from you, you did not turn from us. Ever faithful, you spoke through the voices of prophets, calling us out of the shadows into your marvelous light.

In the fullness of time, your Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. In Christ, you came to proclaim justice, to heal the sick, to feast with the outcast, to love radically. In Christ you conquered death, and opened the way to eternal life.

As we gather at this table, we remember all you have done for us since the foundation of the world. With thanksgiving, we take this bread and this cup and proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord, even as we yearn for the day when you will come again to make all things new.

God With Us — In this season, you give us light that proclaims *peace*. So — knowing you come as the Prince of Peace — we pray for the places plagued by violence. You give us light that proclaims *hope*. So — trusting in your presence among us — we pray for those who dwell in darkness and despair. You give us light that proclaims *love*. So we pray that all may know your compassionate heart that summons us to this table. You give us light that proclaims *joy*. So we pray that this table reminds all your children of the feast that is to come, when we will sit at your table in glory.

We lift this prayer to you, in the name of the one who comes, and join our voices to offer the words he taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**