

Hearts On Fire

Given 4/24/22 by Robin Mitchell

This sermon is a companion to the one I gave back in February; they're both reappraisals of a sermon I gave about ten years ago on how to approach the Bible, where I said that it should be seen as a collection of stories the Jewish people were telling about God. And God, to quote the Paul Tillich reading we just heard, could be read as "the source of your being, your ultimate concern, what you take seriously without any reservation", and to that I added "the highest values, the greatest good, that you can imagine." And as you'll see, I still stand by that, but as I was talking about some of the Bible stories in my original sermon I fell into what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "the language of contempt." My February sermon was all about that; how easy it is to fall into when we're talking about people who are different from us, religiously or politically, and some suggestions on how to avoid it.

And so today I want to talk about some of the specific stories I maligned, to see how we can read them without contempt but still with modern eyes. I said in February that I had become uneasy about my old sermon after studying with the Methodists and learning gentler ways of reading those stories. Mostly it came from reading a book by Rob Bell called *What is the Bible?* where he started from the same place I did – that the Bible should be read as a collection of stories about God – but was much kinder about the stories themselves.

And this got my attention in a big way – I don't get too upset when someone approaches a subject with more insight or knowledge or articulateness than I do; I just sort of accept it as the way of the world. But when someone takes the same path as me, but does it with more kindness or generosity of spirit, that feels like more of a rebuke, of a call to do better. So I want to go back to some of those stories and see how, and more importantly why, we can read them today with modern yet respectful eyes.

In his book, Rob Bell said that since these were people's stories about God, the worst possible question you can ask when reading them is "why did God do that?" Why did God tell Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac? Why did God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? As Bell says, these are just stories people were telling about their vision of ultimate good – don't drag God into them! Instead, he says, the best question you can ask is "why did they write this story down?" What made it important enough to keep as they were winnowing down their oral tradition into the texts that were going to define and explain them as a people? So let's go back to some of the stories I maligned and look at them again in that light.

The first is the story of Noah's flood, which I used as an example of how the God of Genesis looked absolutely deranged to us today. And to be sure, this is a troublesome story – to our modern eyes it has two and a half big problems. Number one, it isn't true – we know for a fact that there wasn't a global flood in the middle of the Bronze Age that submerged Mount Everest and killed every living thing on earth except for one plucky boatload of survivors. Number two, and this is the part I hammered on in my original sermon, not only is it a made-up story; it's a terrible story – how could you possibly worship a god who did things like that? And number two and a half, not only is it a terrible, made-up story, but it's not even original – there are lots of earlier flood stories in the Middle East; the authors of Genesis just stole it from the Sumerians or the Chaldeans or one of the other peoples there who were telling that story hundreds of years earlier.

But if you look at it through the lens of “why did they write this story down?”, that third objection is the key to the others. They wrote it down because it was part of the shared history of all the peoples in the area, so when they came to write their history of the world – which is what Genesis is – they couldn’t possibly leave it out. None of us personally experienced the Civil War, but it’s such a part of our shared story that we’re all sure it happened, and if we were writing a history of the United States we would have to include it or no one would take us seriously. And there was apparently some spectacular aquatic event that actually happened that seared flood stories into the tribal memories of everyone living in the Middle East – it was the end of the Ice Age, with glaciers melting and sea levels rising; scientists think the Mediterranean broke through the Bosphorus and flooded the Black Sea sometime after people had settled in the area, which would certainly do it.

So the authors of Genesis knew that a great, catastrophic flood had happened, and given the mindset of the time that meant that God had caused it. But this was a problem for them, because their vision of God loved people and wanted to be in relation with them – as the Psalmist says, “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” They needed to somehow square their growing vision of God’s goodness and love with the undeniable fact of the flood, and that moves us from why they wrote the story to how, how they tweaked the stories they had inherited into something that worked for them and their vision of God.

The tweaks happened at the beginning and the end of the story. Here’s how the flood story starts in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh: “But in those days of yore, the multitudes teemed upon the face of the Earth and the unceasing clamor and wickedness of the people aroused the wrath of the Gods.” The wrath of the Gods! But here’s the same thing from Genesis: “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.” God regretted; his heart was troubled – we can be wrathful toward outsiders, but this is how we tend to talk about people we are in relation with.

And what is the “wickedness” that upset God so much? When we hear Christians yelling about wickedness these days we immediately know they’re talking about sex, but that wasn’t true back when this was being written. The Jewish prophets are mostly railing against the violence and iniquity of the times, not about the obsessions of the modern Christian right. In her book *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong talks about the Axial Age, the time about 2,500 years ago when all of the modern religions had their origins – monotheism in the Middle East, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Taoism and Confucianism in China – and says that what drove it was the extreme brutality of the times and people’s desperate desire for a morality that would move them beyond it. We had armies with metal weapons hacking out empires; we had the beginnings of a market economy with extremes of wealth and poverty; but we had no real notions of human rights or welfare states. Life was brutal, and living where they did, at the crossroads of empires, the Jews felt the brunt of it. They were conquered by the Babylonians and the Assyrians and were in constant warfare with other tribes, and their hearts must have been sick with it. It would be like us today feeling heartsick knowing that we’re destroying the earth with climate change and habitat destruction and microplastics everywhere, with the sixth great extinction well underway – it’s easy to imagine Gaia regretting that she ever created human beings!

So the flood happens, as it has to, more in sorrow than in anger. And then afterwards we have the second tweak to the story – in Gilgamesh, both the gods and the people are shocked by the violence of

the flood and decide to go their separate ways, to have nothing to do with each other anymore. But the Jewish god is relational, so he makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants that he will never do it again, and sets a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his promise. Again, this is the action of a God who wants to be in relationship with us, a God who regards humans as worthy of making covenants with. And since this story is being told after the flood, God's promise is still binding – regardless of what God may have done in the past, this story tells the people hearing it that they don't have to worry about it happening again.

I originally looked at this through the lens of “why did God do that” and got a story about God's depravity. But when we look at it through the lens of “why did they write this story down” we see something more instructive; we see people standing up for their vision of a loving and relational God even in the face of what seems like contrary evidence. It's easy to use the language of contempt towards God's violence in the story, but doing that hides the wisdom and the humanity of the people telling it.

And the other thing I really regret from my original sermon is my claim that the God of the Old Testament was concerned only with the Jewish people, that it took Christianity to expand the notion of God's love and care to all of humankind. In fact, the Hebrew Bible – what Christians call the Old Testament – is mostly a history of the Jewish people, so naturally they're at the center of its stories, just as United States history books are mostly about the United States. But we can already see from the flood story that God doesn't only care about the Jews – God's rainbow covenant happened before the time of Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish race, so it was a covenant with all of humanity. There are many other examples of this – when King Solomon builds the first Temple in Jerusalem, he asks God to pay special attention to the prayers of foreigners who come to visit it. But perhaps the most spectacular example of this this is the story of Jonah and the whale.

The story begins with God telling Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh to tell them that he is about to destroy them for their wickedness if they don't change their ways. On the surface this sounds like pretty standard stuff for Old Testament prophets, until you realize that Nineveh wasn't a Jewish city – it was the capital of the Assyrians, their enemies, who had invaded Israel, besieged their cities, killed and exiled their people.

And so Jonah doesn't want any part of this. The story doesn't explicitly say why, but we can certainly imagine reasons. Imagine walking into a strange city and saying “this god you don't even believe in, the god of your enemies, says to shape up or he's going to smite you!” Jonah must have expected to get stoned to death before he'd even had a chance to wash up from his journey. And then more deeply, these were his enemies – he wanted to see them destroyed! Imagine a Ukrainian being told to go save Russia from God's wrath, or the parent of a Black child who had been lynched being told to go save the Whites in her town, and you can imagine how Jonah must have felt.

So he does what a lot of us would probably do – instead of going to Nineveh, he gets on a ship bound for Tarshish in Spain, as far in the other direction as it was possible to get in that time. And God causes a great storm that threatens to sink the ship, the sailors figure out that it's Jonah's fault, and he tells them to throw him overboard. As soon as they do the storm stops, and “the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights,” praying in thanksgiving to God for having saved him.

Now the fish is a great detail; I love its extravagance even though I don't entirely know how to deal with it. It could be symbolism; it could be a reference to another story that everyone back then knew. Rich Macdonald in our Sacred Texts class said that maybe Jonah needed to have this concrete experience of God's power and compassion to make him an effective prophet in Nineveh, so maybe one subtext is that you can't really preach about something you haven't seen yourself. Or maybe it's just the Axial-Age version of gratuitous CGI in an action movie today – who knows? But whatever; the fish spits Jonah up on dry land after three days and God again tells him to go to Nineveh.

He still doesn't want to go, for all the same reasons, but he really doesn't want to get the fish treatment again, so he goes to Nineveh. And to what had to be his utter amazement, they listen to him – the king tells everyone to rend their garments, to wear sackcloth and ashes, to fast and repent. And God sees this and relents, and vows not to destroy them after all.

And how does Jonah feel about this? He has saved a great city; he's been the instrument of God's love and mercy; he's probably a little surprised to still be alive. So how does he react? Jonah is pissed! He goes into this great rant which I'm going to quote straight from the Bible because I really can't tell it any better than this:

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

"I knew this was going to happen! You're such a liberal squish – why do I even deal with you???" And God tries to show him the light, saying "should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?" Even though people are so often screwups, who can't tell right from wrong or their right hand from their left, this is a vision of God that still loves them, that still wants to draw them in.

So it's a great story, especially with the whole fish thing, but my heart is really struck silent with holy awe when I ask the question "why did they write this story down?" Why did they write a story about God loving their enemies more than they could, about their representative who would rather die than see God manifesting as love? It certainly doesn't make them look good, so why did they write it down?

And the only answer I have is that whoever wrote it down did so because his heart was so on fire with his vision of God that he couldn't stop himself. Muslims say that the revelations in the Qur'an began when the angel Gabriel seized the Prophet Mohammed's body and mind and commanded him to "recite!" and I imagine that happening here; that the greatness and the power of his vision of ultimate goodness seized the author and compelled him to "recite!" regardless of how the story made him and his people look.

And moments like these, I think, are the real reason why it's still important for us as UU's to read sacred scripture today. You will hear the usual reasons like "to gain wisdom from other religious traditions" or "to understand the beliefs of others", and those are good reasons, if a little bloodless. But I think the real reason is because there are places in there where their authors were on fire with a transcendent vision of holy love and goodness, and reading it can touch our hearts at a level deeper than just

“understanding.” Rob Bell said “the point [of reading scripture] is to enter into its stories with such intention and vitality that you find what it is that inspired people to write these books” and I think that’s exactly the spirit to have.

This has been my own experience – I was first drawn to Christianity by reading the Gospels with an open heart, and there were places in there where my heart just caught fire with the challenge of living up to the vision that the authors saw. And later I had the same experience with Buddhism after reading Shantideva’s *The Way of the Bodhisattva* – his heart was so on fire with the goodness of awakened heart and the urgency of cultivating it that that I couldn’t help but respond. My life has been so illumined by having these two faiths, and that light was kindled by reading their scriptures with a receptive heart and being touched by the fire within them.

Of course you need to use discernment – if you read almost any religious text, from the Bible to the *Bodhicharyavatara* to the *Humanist Manifesto*, sooner or later you’re going to run into some pretty icky stuff. They were all shaped by the prejudices and blindnesses of their cultures, times, and authors. But that doesn’t completely hide the fact that their authors were on fire with visions of the greatest good they could imagine, and they expressed them as well as they could in the words and concepts they had available to them.

And the great thing about being a UU is that for us, revelation is still going on; scripture wasn’t sealed thousands of years ago when the Buddha or the Gospel writers died. Our Sources talk about “words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love,” and those people are still speaking. So whatever touches your heart with the spirit of divine love, whether it’s ancient scripture or contemporary voices, approach it with a heart yearning to be set on fire. I really fear the wave of darkness that is spreading in our country and the world, and I think we will need all the fires we can light to keep the darkness away from ourselves and our communities. But we have hearts to match the moment if we can keep them open to the spark that will set them on fire as beacons of love and hope.

Amen, namaste, and may that be so.