

The tale of Jonah is a study in God's capacity for judgment and God's freedom in forgiveness. The city of Nineveh is taken up as a case study of a great concentration of human power (superpower), which finally must come to terms with the purposes of God. The key players in the action are Jonah the prophet, the people of Ninevah, their king, and Yahweh. Jonah was given this task from Yahweh: Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." As you recall, Jonah was afraid to do this, so he ran away, got swallowed up by the big fish who spit him back on shore and, finally ended up delivering God's message. The city of Nineveh was the non-Jewish superpower who was behaving in an ungodly manner - - - and didn't know it. Specifically, they were doing hamas, (violence). This kind of violence in the Old Testament is defined as abusive exploitation of the weak by the strong. It is a huge sin against the Holiness of Israel's God. The thing to note about the people in this city is that they "believed God." The text does not say that they believed the prophet or his message, but God. The verb believe here does not suggest any faith in Yahweh, but only that they accepted the threat as a true and valid one. Even though Jonah's message did not include this option, they repented of their wickedness in the predictable and familiar ritual of fasting and sackcloth. By doing so, they demonstrated a daring, imaginative and inventive spirit that moved beyond the prophetic word itself to fashion an

*uninvited response of repentance. The king is the player who demonstrated a reflective theological capacity. He contributed the thought that if they repented, God might change God's mind to destroy them. The king of Nineveh entertains the daring theological option that human action can impinge on God and cause God to alter the terrible decree. He imagined that God has the freedom to act in an alternative way. Yahweh is the main actor in this whole of a tale who is *nhm* ---free to change God changed God's mind, Judge of creation, Almighty, Compassionate, and in covenantal partnership with humanity. (italics from Texts for Preaching, p. 115-117)*

Jonah 3:1-10.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time; "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast and all of them, from the greatest to the last put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself

with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh. "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction.

"Our Third Option"

Everybody is afraid and angry in Jonah's whale of a tale. God is fearful that people in Ninevah have turned into violent beasts instead of compassionate human beings. The Holiness of God is angry at their sin to the point of choosing to clean up their ungodly behavior. The prophet Jonah is afraid to go and tell the beasts in Ninevah that they are being bad. He is angry at God for making him the messenger that these people will surely kill. The whole city of Ninevah is afraid of their weakness and vulnerability. Anger fuels their abusive violence and directs their exploitation of the weak.

Fear and anger surface as significant emotions that shape and move the characters in this Biblical narrative just as they do in the people stories of every generation. When self psychologists who study human growth and development attempt to tell us why this is so, they bring us back to our birth. What they teach us about this time is that the first emotion that an infant experiences after birth is fear: Fear that happens when that first rush of cold air startles the inexperienced lungs; fear that happens when the hurt of hunger pains take over a satisfied appetite; and fear that threatens when the close hug of mothers womb suddenly becomes a hand smack to the bottom. Newborn fear is the instinctual kind that is essential for survival. It alerts the body to threatening forces. It is good because it leads to the development of another emotion that is also necessary for human survival, anger. The emotion of anger is nothing more than fear taken up a notch and matured so that it can activate a bodily response to the fear. Anger rises up against the threatening force to activate the sucking reflex, mobilize the arms to fling and the legs to kick, and provoke the voice into crying.

Instinctual anger and fear are two raw ingredients that constitute the matrix from which our unique self develops. They are good and they are essential for our survival. But to prevent these raw instincts from taking over our humaneness, (ANGER is only one letter short of DANGER!) fear and anger need to do some maturing within us. Specifically, in us, fear and anger must develop

in their ability to elicit more behavioral responses than the fight or flight reactions that characterize instinctually bound animals. As you recall, when instinctually bound animals are overwhelmed with fear, they can only flee or fight---run away or attack. Wags, my mother's Jack Russell terrier has taught me a lot about being bound by instinctual fear and anger. By birth she is a stray who attaches to strangers and greets you with a grin. She is loving and she is a people dog. She's also a chicken whose afraid to get her paws wet, dirty or hurt. But, by nature she is also an aggressive dog and a compulsive hunter of the rat. At her core personality she is fear based and patterned to attack. I know that when she gets terrified and angered she will automatically fight and bite. She has bitten me. It seems that when terror overtakes her, the memory of the time I wacked her a good one when she was bad erases her memory of all the other times she only got a bad dog scolding. When she gets scared, fear of harm overtakes her, and she loses her ability to engage me in a friendly way.

History records innumerable ways in which fight or flight people have diminished our human story. One such example is the manner in which good Christian Englishmen in the early colonial days in Concord, MA. treated Native Americans after they failed to "win" them over to Christianity. The strong exploited the weak by drawing up and enforcing orders of conduct . . . that applied to Native Americans only. *1) Native Americans were to be fined for drinking---20 shillings. 2) they were to observe the Lord's*

Day---20 shillings. 3) they were to cease and desist from picking lice---fine, 1 shilling. 4) they were to stop greasing themselves--fine, 1 shilling per default. 5) they were to pray in their wigwams and say grace before and after meals. 6) they were forbidden to play their former native sports. 7) they were not to commit adultery--punishable by death 8) they were not to engage in howling as an expression of grief. (Gilbert, When I Open My Window, p. 118)

The Biblical story of Jonah is a case study about the way in which humans can, in faith, develop the ability and learn to exercise a third option to those two instinctual animal fight or flight ones. It is a theory of development that introduces the human capacity for reflection, creative imagination, faith, freedom of choice, personal power, and compassionate understanding into that limited two option response set mix. It is an extended meditation on the character and peaceful purpose of an Almighty God. It is a comedy that highlights the benefits of matured anger that challenges us to right a wrong; calls us to decisive action to protect from harm something that we judge to be of genuine value, and empowers us to action in pursuit of justice. But most of all, it is humanity's soul story of discovering that the third option, of compassionate engagement with the enemy exists as a free will choice that lays within each person as a pure relational gift from God. What this means is that when we are afraid, each person has the capacity to choose either to flee, fight or stay and engage the enemy in compassionate peace talks.

In our internal realm, we begin the discovery and learn to grown in our third option whenever rage rears its ugly head within us, shame overtakes our self esteem, guilt punishes us, anxiety takes over control, and irresolvable grief threatens to undo us. They are the personal enemies that give us the opportunity to behave like the king of Nineveh and engage the power, get to know the fear and anger that fuels it, and repent of our sin against God. A few months ago, the Dahli Lama commented on the exciting results that have emerged from recent studies on the relationship between religion and science. One of the neuro-science brain studies showed that people who meditated about 20 minutes a day had larger neuron growth in the frontal lobe of their brains (the part that assesses and integrates the bigger picture, mediates impulse control, does what we commonly speak of as "higher brain functioning, and is activated during meditation and prayer). It's the brain place that grows when we place our hands in the yoga prayer position over our heart center and say the word, Namastad (which means, I honor the Divine in you). I think that enlarged frontal lobe, extended meditation, prayer, and centered peace all comprise the fertile soil for growing our free will third option of compassionate engagement which seeks a balance among the powers that rule our lives.

In the world arena, the Jill Carroll hostage story is humanity's current study in the development of our third option. Jill is a western Muslim journalist who went over to Iraq to promote compassionate understanding between

people. From what her mother said, Jill knew that she was placing herself in harms way. Predictably the terrorists took her and said that they would kill her unless the American government releases 8 Iraqi women prisoners.

* President Bush doesn't negotiate with terrorists. So, is there hope for Jill? The negotiation experts say yes, if her captors are not trapped by their ideology. They say that there is hope if she is getting to know them personally (they tell her about their family and she tells them about hers), if Jill's parents can help the world know Jill personally, if religious leaders make personal appeals on her behalf --- if compassionate engagement and personal understanding surfaces as the third option/power to fear and anger in that hostage room . . . then a non-violent end for Jill is possible.

In the beginning of the Biblical whale of a tale, everybody was fearful and angry. By the end, Jonah alone remained in his original fearful and angry state. He fled the city and sat under a tree to pout and die rather learn the third option, personally engage the enemy with the spirit of compassionate understanding, and help God out by celebrating the peaceful end. In Jonah's view, that was God's business and not his. And so, the question for each of us as we end is this---Where do I (we) stand? Is the pursuit, growth, and celebration of God's third option, mine (ours)?