

The Sign of Jonah

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April 13, 2008

For our Christmas Eve service this past year, I was asked to read the portion of the Advent narrative relating the visit of the Magi. You know: the story of the three wise men from the East as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. After the service, one of our good and faithful church brothers came up and put his arm on my shoulder and asked me how, as someone with an interest in history and historical accuracy, I could stand up there and read a story that was most likely unhistorical, which is the historian's slang for a load of bunkum. I mumbled something back about respecting the integrity of the Advent narrative, but I think I owe him a more direct response. So here it is, with the understanding that what I will be saying is not the "teaching position" of this church or any other church.

How are we to read biblical stories that appear to us to be unhistorical?

I Clement 25 — "Let us consider that wonderful sign [of the resurrection] which takes place in Eastern lands, that is, in Arabia and the countries round about. There is a certain bird which is called a phoenix. This is the only one of its kind and lives five hundred years. And when the time of its dissolution draws near that it must die, it builds itself a nest of frankincense and myrrh and other spices into which, when the time is fulfilled, it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays a certain kind of worm is produced, which, being nourished by the juices of the dead bird, brings forth feathers. Then, when it has acquired strength, it takes up that nest in which are the bones of its parent, and bearing these it passes from the land of Arabia into Egypt to the city called Heliopolis. And, in open day, flying in the sight of all men, it places them on the altar of the sun and having done this, hastens back to its former abode. The priests then inspect the registers of the dates and find that it has returned exactly as the 500th year was completed.

"Do we then deem it any great and wonderful thing for the Maker of all things to raise up again those that have piously served Him in the assurance of a good faith, when even by a bird He shows us the mightiness of His power to fulfill His promise?"

Tacitus 4:81 — "In the months during which Vespasian was waiting at Alexandria for the periodical return of the summer gales and settled weather at sea, many wonders occurred which seemed to point him out as the object of the favor of heaven and of the partiality of the Gods. One of the common people of Alexandria, well known for his blindness, threw himself at the Emperor's knees and implored him with groans to heal his infirmity. This he did by the advice of the God Serapis, whom this nation, devoted as it is to many superstitions, worships more than any other divinity. He begged Vespasian that he would deign to moisten his cheeks and eye-balls with his spittle. Another with a

diseased hand, at the counsel of the same God, prayed that the limb might feel the print of a Caesar's foot ... And so Vespasian, supposing that all things were possible to his good fortune and that nothing was any longer past belief, with a joyful countenance, amid the intense expectation of the multitude of bystanders, accomplished what was required. The hand was instantly restored to its use and the light of day again shone upon the blind. Persons actually present attest both facts, even now when nothing is to be gained by falsehood.”

In my world, ornithologists have not found a phoenix in Arabia or Egypt or anywhere else. Nor in my world do emperors or anyone else restore sight to the blind by spitting on their eyes.

The core of these stories is the story of transformation and restoration: a process so powerful that the narrators used some of their most powerful stories for it.

Transformation came through people who were believed to have been touched by Transcendence.

Transformation/restoration was expressed in terms of the way the narrators understood the world to work — a way of understanding that is no less foreign to us than are phoenixes.

Clues in the New Testament narratives that the narrators either weren't sure what was happening or are describing something rather different what we might think.

Apostle Paul's description of the resurrected Christ in I Cor. 15. Paul distinguishes between the “natural body” and the “spiritual body” and scorns the idea that it was Christ's natural body was resurrected. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God!” he thunders in verse 50. So, if Jesus' natural body was not what was raised from the dead, what exactly was it that was raised from the dead? Paul's explanation, such as it is, appears to confuse things even further.

And what about the puzzle in Mark 6: 5? And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk and healed them.

So long as we insist on interpreting these stories of transformation with the belief that we understand completely what was happening, we risk coming to a fork in the road: either we have to force ourselves to believe that there are phoenixes, or we just dismiss all the stories of transformation and concentrate on something like the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.

But I think there might be a third way. A way of recovering and perhaps even preserving the language of transformation for our time.

Our text this morning regards the scribes and Pharisees who were seeking a sign. I'm going to pass over the politics of this passage, e.g., the dynamics between Jesus and certain religious leaders, and simply identify myself as someone who also belongs to an adulterous and sinful generation and who also seeks a sign. What Jesus offers to them and to me is the sign of Jonah. I don't know what his audience may have made of that reference. I do know that they weren't sailors and so likely knew nothing of the lore of the sea, and I don't either. So I say, "Oh great!" Jonah who doesn't do what Yahweh tells him to do and ends up in the belly of a whale for three days? Talk about your historical improbabilities!

But let's look at the story of Jonah from the point of view of a narrative of transformation:

First things first: the story of Jonah is not a child's story, so I do not believe that the story of Jonah should be taught to young children. They already have enough monsters in their lives without having to deal with the appalling notion that God is the chief monster keeper who will see to it that they get swallowed up if they disobey. Whoever teaches such a thing, it would be better if a millstone was hanged about his neck and he were drowned.

The story of Jonah is not about Yahweh as a despot who keeps monsters in a pit to devour people who displease him. What it does seem to be about is what can happen when people try to deny their spiritual calling. The story of Jonah is not about divine punishment for failing to do one's chores; it is about the havoc that can be wreaked when people flee from their true spiritual destiny.

As the story goes, Yahweh instructs Jonah to go to Nineveh to tell the inhabitants of that apparently thriving metropolis that their wickedness had come to Yahweh's attention. Jonah, however, wants nothing to do with this assignment; the story doesn't tell us why. Jonah instead goes down to the coast, finds a ship bound for the Israelite equivalent of Timbuctoo and books passage. The text of the story is very clear: Jonah is going to Timbuctoo to get away from Yahweh.

And what happens to Jonah's ship? Yahweh causes so great a windstorm that the ship threatens to founder. The ship's crew tries everything to save themselves and their vessel. They call on their own gods to save them. They try to help the gods by throwing their cargo overboard. Jonah, amazingly enough, is below decks asleep while all this is going on. The boatswain finds him there and wakes him up and urges him to call on his god for help. The story does not say whether Jonah does anything, but no matter: the storm does not relent. The sailors then resort to a time-honored method for discovering the source of their problems: divination by casting lots. The lot points to Jonah as the reason they and the ship are in danger.

The crew is of course eager to find out just why it is that they are on the verge of

sleeping amongst the fishes, so they bombard Jonah with questions: “Who are you? Where are you from? Where are you going? What’s going on?” To which Jonah replies: “I’m a Hebrew. I worship Yahweh, the God of Heaven who created the sea and the dry land.” Jonah goes on to tell them that he is running away from Yahweh. The sailors are not pleased that they are caught up in Jonah’s predicament as they are truly innocent bystanders. They ask him what they should do to get the seas to calm down. Jonah replies that they should throw him into the water. Jonah’s answer puts the sailors in a real bind: should they sink with their ship because Yahweh is angry at Jonah, or should they risk Yahweh’s wrath by killing Jonah, which tossing him into the angry sea would most surely accomplish.

The sailors try to create a third option: they take out the oars and row like crazy for shore. It doesn’t work. So, offering an invocation to Yahweh, whom they do not know and do not worship, they pitch Jonah over the rail and into the sea. It works. The sea calms. They’re saved. The sailors make offerings to Yahweh.

But what happens to Jonah? Yahweh has prepared “a great fish” that swallows Jonah and there in the belly of this fish he stays for the requisite three days and nights. At the end of the three days and nights, Jonah begins to get a different take on matters. He prays to Yahweh, singing his miseries and his despair, and acknowledging that Yahweh can raise him from the dead, as it were. He promises to “keep his vows” — although we have no record of what those vows were — and to offer sacrifices to Yahweh.

Yahweh causes the fish to vomit Jonah up onto the dry land, whereupon Jonah does not refuse Yahweh’s second instruction to go to Nineveh.

Well now. What a story! Or, as many commentators say, “What a myth!” But to me, the story of transformation in Jonah is a cautionary story about the price that we pay for attempting to flee from our vision. Not only do we pay this price when we attempt to run away, but innocents along our way may be harmed as well. Let’s look at the story again.

Jonah is not a child with a list of chores that his father has assigned him; he is a grown man, presumably going about his business when the spiritual call comes to him. His reaction? He runs away. Again, this is a grown man running away. It is not a child running away to hide behind a big rock because he doesn’t want to sweep off the front walk; it is an adult who is completely undone by the fact of the spiritual call. The only response he can think of is “Run away! Run away!” for he is not ready to receive, understand or do what his call requires.

Can we moderns understand this? What happens to us when deep in our hearts we hear a call that threatens to overturn the world we have grown accustomed to? Do we readily and eagerly embrace it? Or does it scare us so badly that we run away?

Jonah runs away. The narrative tells us that every direction he goes is down: he runs down to Joppa; he goes down to a ship; when the ship gets underway, he goes down below deck; and, as the narrative soon shows, his downward journey has only begun. He is also going to Tarshish, which is not down. It's just away, far away, as far away as maybe Sardinia or perhaps even Spain. What counts for Jonah is that nobody there has ever heard of Yahweh. He thinks he might be safe once he gets away from those familiar locales. This is the direction that some of us find ourselves going when we are, like Jonah, unable to face our own deep spiritual call. We run away from things familiar and hope to lose ourselves among strange customs, strange habits and strange peoples.

Jonah's flight away and down leads him onto the expanse of the open sea. These are the primordial waters that are the very fount of creation, the origins of all and everything. When the earth was without form and void, the spirit of God hovered over this primordial watery chaos. Jonah thinks he has left his Yahweh behind on the sacred mountain and under the sacred terebinth oak, but the story tells us that Jonah has fled directly into a still more primordial domain of the spiritual: the watery domain of creation and re-creation. Instead of taking him to safety, his path takes him, as it were, into the very workshop of the Almighty.

The storm that comes to threaten his ship is also a telling depiction of the havoc that can be caused among innocent people by someone who is deep spiritual turmoil. My impression is that some of our most powerful leaders are people who are in deep spiritual turmoil, just as Jonah was. Their presence brings strife and damage everywhere, while, like Jonah, they seem unaware of the danger that accompanies them — they are below deck with Jonah asleep, as it were. They are oblivious to the darkness within them and the danger it can bring to others, and aren't even able to acknowledge the possibility that the turmoil around them has something to do with them. That is why, it seems to me, it is important that we own up to our own darkness constantly as a way of taking responsibility for it and helping to prevent the innocents around us from being harmed by it.

Jonah doesn't exactly present a stirring picture of accountability in this regard: he waits to see how things turn out, that is, until the lot has pointed him out as the source of all these troubles for the ship and its crew. But when the sailors put him to the test, he comes clean and tells the truth. And now comes an interesting twist to the story: since the storm was ultimately brought about by Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh, would it not have sufficed if he had repented on the deck and told the sailors to turn the ship around so that he could go to Nineveh, as Yahweh had originally instructed? The fact that Jonah doesn't take that step is what makes this story into more than a simple story of punishment for a task refused. What is required for Jonah is not merely the accomplishment of an assigned task; rather, he must come to terms in a much deeper and more profound way with his relationship to his calling. He must be transformed.

Jonah instead tells the sailors that in order for them to be saved, he must be tossed overboard. The sailors see very clearly the bind Jonah's advice puts them in: if they throw him over the side, they can be accused of a lynching, if not a murder; if they don't, they may well be insulting Jonah's god Yahweh. What to do? They first attempt the prudent thing: they try to row to shore. It doesn't work; they get nowhere. They find they have no choice but to throw Jonah over the rail. This is the dilemma that we as good friends can find ourselves in when we see someone in deep turmoil: how much of ourselves do we risk in an effort to help? At what point do we say: "Friend Jonah, I can't let you drag me under with you because of your troubles"? These are not easy times for anyone.

So Jonah goes over the side into the depths of the primordial sea alone. His descent continues. He probably thinks he's going to die and he's justified in thinking so. When we are in the grip of a crisis so profound that even our friends have left us to save themselves, we are on the point of a death of some kind. Yet in the face of death, life may persist. Yahweh, whom Jonah has thought of as his spiritual persecutor, now becomes his spiritual protector. Yahweh has prepared a strange sort of cocoon or lifeboat for Jonah: a monster fish that swallowed him. With death all around him, Jonah finds himself in a kind of womb that keeps him safe. He is carried inside this divinely prepared monster not unlike the way an infant is carried inside its mother until it is ready to be born — or, in Jonah's case, reborn.

But what a gestation. Jonah is in pitch darkness; he reports that he has seaweed wrapped around his head; in all likelihood he cannot move. This is the picture of someone whose crisis is so profound that he has completely withdrawn from the world into the darkness of his own primordial depths. As far as his friends and family are concerned, he is unavailable, even dead. All he has is his own awareness that he is not dead, but this awareness provides the grounds for his next step: he prays. His prayer is a summary of phrases from the Psalms and in content amounts to "Wow! Look what I've been through, and I'm still not dead! Yahweh has kept me alive!" Jonah reaches into his own depths and finds a passion for life that proves central to his deliverance. When he was in flight from Yahweh, Yahweh appeared to him as vengeful and punishing. When he reached the extremity of his flight, he came to know an even deeper truth about Yahweh that had always been deep within him: the source of the spiritual call that tormented him so powerfully was also the source of his life and his protection. By fleeing his calling, he was fleeing that which grounded and protected his life in the world.

Having found this center, Jonah is now ready to resume his life and assume responsibility for his spiritual calling — in his case, his prophetic gift. The great fish obligingly redelivers him into the world of normal human discourse again: dry land. Jonah has in effect been reborn. He has passed through a great purging and transformation and has been set back into the world again as a new man. The story is wonderfully apt: those of us who emerge from such experiences are still likely a mess

by the world's standards: our clothes and person are disheveled and we reek of fish guts or worse. But we are alive. We've been to Sheol and back. We know what salvation tastes like. We rejoice.

So there is might indeed to be other ways of seeing the sign of Jonah: ways of preserving the underlying theme of transformation. The transformation that is pointed towards by stories of the death and return of the phoenix; by stories of restoration of health to the sick and sight to the blind; and ultimately by the story of the triumph of self-sacrificing love over death. The Sign of Jonah is Christ the Phoenix.

Jonah's voyage of transformation is one that comes to very few of us. To those among us who must pass Jonah's way, we offer prayers of thanksgiving in anticipation of your return, for we believe that your protector is Jonah's protector, may be found even in the very depths of the most primal waters.

Amen