**Humble Servants of an Irascible God** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Jonah 3:10-4:11 Saint Paul, Minnesota
September 24, 2023

Today’s scriptures put me in mind of Walter Brueggemann’s 19 theses. I’ve referenced these before and the reason I turn to it again is because of the pathos, both human and Divine, in today’s readings.

After years of teaching and writing, Brueggemann recognized that our culture subtly indoctrinates us in a way of being, thinking, and acting that can be detrimental to communal life. He refers to it as being “scripted” and writes, “**The dominant scripting** in our society is a script of technological, therapeutic, consumer militarism that socializes us all, liberal and conservative.”

He used the term “therapeutic to refer to the assumption that there is a product, treatment, or process to counteract every ache and pain and discomfort and trouble, so that life may be lived without inconvenience. Technological is in the list to refer to the assumption that everything can be fixed and made right through human ingenuity. Consumerism is on the list because we live in a culture that believes that the whole world and all its resources are available to us without compunction and that more is better. And he uses the word ‘militarism’ to name his conclusion that our society exists to protect and maintain this system.” “This militarism” he says, “occupies much of the church, much of the national budget and much of the research programs of universities.”

For Brueggemann then, the Bible is a counter-script which is exactly what we see here in Jonah and Matthew today. But he has two cautions for us before we dive into the readings. First, he says, it’s important to realize that, “**[The biblical] script is not monolithic**, one dimensional or seamless. It is ragged and disjunctive and incoherent. Partly it is ragged and disjunctive and incoherent because it has been crafted over time by many committees. But it is also ragged and disjunctive and incoherent because the key character is illusive and irascible in freedom and in sovereignty and in hiddenness, and, I’m embarrassed to say, in violence – [a] huge problem for us.”

And secondly, “12. **The ragged, disjunctive, and incoherent** quality of the counter-script to which we testify cannot be smoothed or made seamless because when we do that the script gets flattened and domesticated and it becomes a weak echo of the dominant script… which is all about certitude, privilege, and entitlement …. Thus care must be taken to let this script be what it is, which entails letting God be God’s irascible self.”

And this is where we meet Jonah today. Jonah received a call to go to Nineveh–a place one commentator referred to as “Sin City.” God needed a prophet to tell the people to repent and return to God. Jonah does not want to be that person so, as soon as the call came in, he went to a port, boarded a ship, and went out to sea. A terrible storm blew in and eventually he had to confess those aboard that he was running away from God, so in order to save the boat and crew, Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by the fish.

Three days later, Jonah came to the realization that doing what God asked would be better than living inside a fish; after giving in to God’s request, he was spat out and then made his way to Nineveh. It took three (more) days to walk from one side of the city to the other and, as he went, he shouted out God’s message: repent and change your ways because you are heading toward massive self-destruction. The king heard of it and immediately called for a fast, put on sackcloth, and sat in the ashes in repentance. And all the people followed his example. As ministries go, this is quite an amazing success!

But rather than a sense of accomplishment and sharing God's joy, Jonah was crushed because his predictions of destruction did not come true. He went up on the hill overlooking the city to sulk. He was angry with God about the whole process. God gifted him with a quick growing shade tree and he was then comforted. But in the morning, God sent a worm and the tree died.

Lodged within this fantastical and vivid story that we usually hand off to the Sunday School, there is a tremendous amount of pathos between Jonah and God

There is a back and forth between goodness and wrath in both characters. But they do not match up. Jonah is angry at being called in the first place but puts himself at greater risk by trying to run away. God is gracious enough to send rescue in the form of the fish– but it is a form of rescue that would drive most anyone to surrender. After Nineveh is saved, Jonah is mad because God is merciful and God is angry with Jonah’s willfulness. As Jonah sulked, the tree grew up beside him and gave him shade; it’s like getting the corner office with the floor to ceiling windows in Manhattan. But discipleship is not a meritocracy. And some old words echo in my mind: the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Discipleship is humbling work.

So I did a little inventory on the marvelous, strange, capricious and cyclical experience of discipleship according to Jonah, it may give us some insights on our resistance to working God’s counter-script:

* First a calling,
* And then a mad dash to get away,
* -being found out as the one responsible for the storm,
* -and then sacrificed for the greater good,
* and, in this case, rescue by a metaphor
* with the ensuing realization that living in hiding and fear is not a real life,
* eventually doing the work but seeing someone else get the reward,
* and then the sulking
* followed by something comforting like shade,
* and finally a worm–

all of it reminding us that a life of faith is not the straight, smooth road of happiness but the road of paradox where joy and sadness live side by side. It is grief, not delight, that deepens and widens the heart. It is struggle and challenge that give us strength and endurance. And the trials give us wisdom and compassion.

Years ago, one of our ministry colleagues here in the Twin Cities shared a story about an opportunity to hire day workers for a church project in another state. He went in the morning and picked up the planned number of workers but they found it was not enough. He went back at least one more time (and I think it was twice) and picked up other workers for the project. At the end of the day he tried to pay everyone the same amount of money. Those who had been working all day were outraged, amid the rancor and hurt, he paid everyone a full days wages and then added an additional sum to the coffers of those who worked the full day. Our ideas of love and justice are not the same as God's idea of love and justice. In working a full day, any one of us would have felt the same–and yet those who have the chance to work only a partial shift have a greater need. And that’s what God knows.

In the last few weeks I had some company from out of town and in both cases with some of the children in my life who have grown to be young adults and trying to figure out what their values are. They are in their first and second jobs finding themselves working in corporations that speak about one set of values and yet, they are witnesses to the compromises and even corruption of those values in order to survive.

They are seeing first- hand that life in community whether country, city, or even church can get so bogged down in the belly of the conflict, or so corrupt and willful that it can no longer move forward. Then we run away to the port and get onboard with therapeutic pain killers like wine, chocolate, and shopping, hoping someone will figure it out and save us before the digestive juices finish their work. What they may not know and what we might share (if we believe it) is that the entire city of Nineveh was known to be corrupt and God wanted to save each and every one of them; the day-workers were poor, anonymous folks who were outcasts from society and God wanted to save each and every one of them. Jonah was one of God’s errant, beloved servants and God wanted to save him too.

With the world’s redemption in mind, our irascible God sometimes says, “It’s my way or the highway,”. The counter-script of the church and the synagogue is that all power, resources, and abundance belong to God, a loving yet sometimes quick-tempered, touchy, snappish God who periodically asks sacrifices of us all. We worship a God who says, “let’s do it my way and even though it may be painful, it will be alright for everyone.”

So we have to check ourselves when we resent the love and mercy we see flowing toward others in this world. We have to check ourselves when we begin to feel wrathful. (Most righteous anger can’t remain thoroughly righteous all the way through unless it’s a process that leads to well-being and peace.) We have to check ourselves when we feel fear, particularly if God is calling us to a new thing.

Because God wants to save us. The God story is not about maintaining the status quo nor about smoothing things out but rather about the humility and transformation that comes when we put the values of the world into a wrestling match with the values of the one who says “The first will be last, and the last will be first.” Because we are not supposed to read about or simply gain understanding about the counter-script, **we are the counter-script**. At every table and in each living room we are called into Jonah’s role in naming the many things around us that do not serve the health and welfare of God’s Shalom. I hope we do not run away from this calling and that we celebrate that God our Savior wants all people to have food, shelter, and safety. May it be so. Amen.