

WHO WILL YOU BE THIS YEAR?

A sermon preached by the Rev. John Nichols on Oct 2, 2016

Every year at this time our friends in the Jewish tradition are asked this question. “Who will you be this year?” This is a question that is very central to our lives. It is a revolutionary question concerning what you want to change about yourself to be more in line with your highest ideals and goals.

At some point most of us accept that we are what we are and we will be what we are now for a long time. Major changes do not seem likely. But, the Jewish tradition believes that not only can we become an improved edition of ourselves, but also we have a responsibility to ourselves and to others to try. This is one of the themes of Rosh Hashanah, and the story that best illustrates that theme is the story of Jonah.

In some ways Jonah is a story that has a comic element, which I will exploit shamelessly. It is also a serious story because it reminds us of the devices and desires of our own hearts and of the root causes of hatred and violence which are embedded in every human nature including yours and mine.

You've all heard about Jonah, but be aware I'm going to dress him in contemporary garb so the story might sound a little different.

Jonah was an average sort of guy. He worked hard all year, and he looked forward to spending two weeks with his family in their time-share condominium by the Dead Sea. But one day – just a week before his vacation – God comes to Jonah and says, “Go and warn the people of Nineveh that they are doing bad things, and if they don't clean up their act I am going to punish the whole misbegotten lot of them.”

Now Jonah wasn't a diplomat. He wasn't a clergyman. He was an average Jonah who had been looking forward to a couple of weeks with the family by the Dead Sea. Maybe some beach volleyball, some swimming, some kosher franks, maybe a whale watch, the whole ball of wax. But we find out from other stories that the God character in this one has a habit of asking people for a level of courage they think they cannot achieve and then do. Now it is Jonah's turn to be tested.

And God knows that calling the Ninevites to repent will be difficult for Jonah. God knows Jonah hates the people of Nineveh. He hates them as much as any ethnic group can hate another. They are not his people. They are not of his religion. They are not easy to get along with, and the last time Jonah's softball team played the Nineveh nine, the pitcher

struck him out four times. After the last strikeout the pitcher did a little victory dance to enhance Jonah's humiliation.

So if the people of Nineveh were doing something that would get them into trouble with God, Jonah thought that would be just fine and dandy. If the people of Nineveh could be visited by Divine wrath – well that was just fine with Jonah. He does not trust this old softie, God, to seek fairness in the way Jonah thinks fairness should be sought.

In Jonah's world fairness means, "I want what's mine and if anyone offends me, then I want them slapped around at the very least." This character God is all too inclined to give them another chance. And Jonah wants no part of that. Fair is fair and Jonah thinks he knows what fair is. Jonah thinks he knows better than God what fair is. Jonah thinks that fairness means, "It's payback time for Nineveh."

So Jonah defies God. Rather than participate in any mission of reconciliation, Jonah books passage on a ship going away from Nineveh in hopes that God will forget about having asked him to save the people of Nineveh. But the ship gets caught in the storm. The sailors, who are not of Jonah's religion, are convinced that someone on board is on the outs with his God. So they draw lots hoping that fate will determine

which person it is and whose God they must appease to stop the sea from rolling.

Jonah, meanwhile, is asleep in the bottom of the boat; because he doesn't really care what danger he has put everyone in. The sailors conclude that it is Jonah who has put them in this peril. When confronted Jonah admits it. His god has probably caused this storm. But, no, Jonah will probably not ask his god to forgive him, because Jonah thinks he knows better than God what is fair, and what is fair is that the Ninevites get punished rather than saved.

Rather than give up the notion that his idea of justice should be imposed on the universe, Jonah will take the whole ship down with him. But then he relents and tells the sailors, " Look if you want to stop the storm, just throw me over the side of the ship, and the storm will stop.

The sailors don't want to do this. The storyteller is making the point that these essentially pagan sailors are made of more compassionate stuff than the self righteous, deeply pious pillar of religion, Jonah. At great risk to their own lives the sailors get into smaller boats and try to row the ship into calmer waters, but Jonah doesn't care whether he lives or dies or who dies trying to save his life.

He would rather drown than change his fixation on what he thinks life owes him.

Finally, there being no other choice, the crewmembers do toss Jonah over the side. And the seas do become calm. Then Jonah is swallowed into the belly of a big fish where he stays for three days. He had no cell phone, no television, and no video games. He couldn't receive electronic communications of any kind. There wasn't much to do. The text tells us that Jonah wrote a poem.

God had rescued Jonah though he didn't deserve it. But Jonah goes on and on in this poem about what a great guy he is, and what a great friend God has been and what a close relationship they are going to have now that Jonah has been saved. Apparently the fish is so disgusted with this self-righteous drivel that it goes, "Yuck!" and, according to the text the fish "vomited" Jonah up onto dry land.

Jonah is not out of the storm. The text wants us to know that the real storm is inside of Jonah. He is drunk on the idea of his own goodness. He is so tossed and turned by his sense of the injustices he thinks ought to be made right to him that he has lost all track of other people: how they feel or what they want. He doesn't know or care if they exist. The only thing that matters to him is that someone should settle

the scores Jonah feels need to be settled in order that things will seem fair to Jonah. If that doesn't happen he doesn't much care what does happen.

God isn't impressed with Jonah's change of heart. But God does send him back to Nineveh to tell them that if they don't stop doing evil things they will be punished. Not wanting to become fish food this time Jonah goes, but the text tells us he never went further than the outskirts of the city. His mission was half hearted to say the least. Standing on the city limits and thinking no one was listening, he whispered God's message to the Ninevites. "Repent or you'll be sorry."

Hoping he had been a spectacular failure at prophecy and social reform, Jonah climbed a hill to watch all the fun, the punishment of the Ninevites. But incredibly someone in Nineveh heard him and believed him and went to the king who also believed him and proclaimed a national day of repentance. The God character in the story is so touched by their repentance that the city is spared.

But Jonah is furious. He says to God, "Now there. You see. I knew this would happen. Where is the justice here, God? Where is the fairness? You went soft on me. I've been waiting here for forty days and forty nights to watch Nineveh get what it richly deserves. And nothing

happens.” Jonah was in a very bad mood. The sun was beating down on him and he was very angry.

God causes a large plant to grow over Jonah., and it gives him so much shade he begins to feel better about life and about himself.

“Perhaps” he thinks, “all is not lost. Perhaps there is goodness in the world.” Just when Jonah was feeling good about himself, God then caused the plant to wither and die leaving Jonah sweltering in the hot sun again, and he became boiling mad.

God asks Jonah, “Are you angry?” Jonah says, “Are you kidding? I am so angry I want to die, again.” Then the character God said something like this., “Think about it Jonah. You did not make this plant. It was one of Life’s good gifts to you. But you were sorry for its death only because it ceased to be of use to you. Yet you felt nothing at all for the lives of 120,000 people who were not of your family, tribe or religion.”

The story ends here. We don’t know if Jonah got the point or if his mind was changed in any way. This may be the storyteller’s way of saying that the battle against self-righteousness never really ends. It never ends in the life of a nation. It never really ends in the life of a community and it never really ends in your life or in mine. The

temptation to judge other people harshly against standards, which inflate our own self-importance, is always there even when we think it isn't.

Self-righteousness is the curse of humankind in every part of the world. It is not – as it claims to be – on the side of virtue protecting the good people of the world. It is the enemy of life. Whenever a self-righteous attitude dismisses the wonder and complexity of any living person or people then there is an attitude that harms all life and defeat itself. Ultimately self-righteousness defeats itself.

One part of the Jonah story has to do with self-righteousness but another aspect has to do with fairness. Jonah didn't think it was fair that the Ninevites got off so easily after all their sinning. Without giving it much thought we easily side with that feeling. There are things that do seem inherently unfair. Nasty and cruel people enjoy perfect health while people who are kind and generous get struck down in the prime of their lives. It's not fair. It's not fair that some people are born advantaged and others disadvantaged simply by the way families and genes sort themselves out. It's just not fair.

We have believed in fairness since we were children, and so it is difficult for us to realize that there may just be an aching inequality in

life itself. The playing field is never entirely level. Fairness – if it means that equal measures of good and bad luck, success and failure come to every individual – is not Life’s issue. I do not think that fairness is God’s issue either. I’m not sure that God can make everything fair, but I am sure that eye for eye is neither what God nor life intends.

In the story Jonah tells God, “This isn’t fair. You should punish those people.” God responds, in effect, “Jonah, It’s not about fairness. It was never about fairness. It’s about compassion.” What the story conveys is that we cannot make right all of the hard things that happen to people, and we may never be able to correct some of the most grievous wrongs. We can be a force for compassion in the world. We can be part of the work of reconciliation.

So what kind of person are you going to be in this New Year? Are you going to expend precious energy bemoaning that life has not dealt you what you think you deserve. Are you going to drag old grievances into the New Year, burdening yourself and, incidentally, boring everyone else.

Are you going to drag your old life into the new. Will you be part of a Greek chorus lamenting what we already know – that the good things of life have not fallen equally upon all of us? Or will you be a

source of courage, healing and hope for others. It's a choice that each of us has to make.

As Unitarian Universalists we do believe that Life makes all things new. We can change. We can shed old grudges and resentments. With hard work we can construct new lives that are free of so much that has not worked for us in the past.

Finally if life is not fair then what is there to celebrate? Certainly not the idea that we are all alone on this darkling plain where anything could happen and nobody cares. If we have learned anything meaningful from living – and if we have been open to being taught – perhaps it is this. While we live we still have more blessings than we can or ever will appreciate. Life offers us more forgiveness than we think we deserve and more power than we call upon to change things for the good of others.

Life surrounds us with people who would support us if we allowed them and with opportunities that would challenge and change us if we accepted those challenges. Fairness is not life's issue. And I don't think it's God's issue. Life's issue with us – or as some might say God's issue – is that we fully accept the gifts we have been given and

make the best use of them so that we become agents of the world's
kindness and compassion.