

Recapitulation, A Sermon in Six Parts: Part 5, "The Sign":
For Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for April 7th 2019 (Fifth Sunday in Lent)
by Foster Freed

Jonah 1: 1-17
Luke 11: 29-32

There are many ways of reading scripture: many ways of holding together Old and New Testaments. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, we are told that God "gathered together in one, all things in Christ."ⁱ Based on that bold idea, the Church Fathers developed a way of reading scripture they referred to as "recapitulation": recapitulation, meaning that the entire work of redemption—including all of the hopes and expectations, all of the trials and turmoil depicted in the Old Testament—have reached their completion in and through the Jesus we meet in the pages of the New Testament.

It is fair to suggest, I think...

...fair to suggest that the Christian tradition has always evidenced a fair degree of ambivalence where signs and wonders are concerned. That ambivalence is grounded in scripture...although it is not restricted to scripture. On the one hand, the New Testament does not hesitate to speak of the signs Jesus himself performed...

...John's Gospel, in particular, makes heavy use of that terminology in describing seven distinct signs Jesus performs...

...but also does not hesitate—especially in the book Acts—to pay considerable attention to the signs enacted by the Apostles as they spread the Gospel throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. On the other hand, there is Jesus' own testimony concerning the limits of signs...and his obvious preference for those who place their trust in him not because they have seen him perform some act of power, but because of the simple trust they are prepared to place in him.

For what it's worth, the Church has continued to evidence that ambivalence. Mainstream Protestantism—the heritage we claim in the United Church—has, for the most part, tended to regard the "age of miracles" as having occurred in Biblical times, which is a shorthand way of suggesting that the "age of miracles is now past". The problem with that, in the world we inhabit in the late 20th/early 21st centuries, is that the places where the Gospel is expanding most rapidly are places—such as Africa—which boast impressive ministries in which "signs and wonders" are frequently experienced. That, of course, is a fascinating topic: but it is a topic for another day. On this day...

...on this day it is hard to avoid thinking of Jesus' response, first voiced in Mark's Gospel, when the Pharisees ask for a sign. His response? Mark informs us that Jesus *sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."*ⁱⁱ As we heard a few moments ago,

however, Luke—as well as Matthew—elaborate on that basic response, with Jesus solemnly informing those in his generation who seek from him a sign, that *no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah*. Further elaborating, he tells them that his generation will not only be ashamed when on the Day of Judgment they are unfavorably compared to the Queen of Sheba, but furthermore that *the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here*.

No sign. No sign for this generation. No sign given to it except. Except the sign of Jonah.

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At the outset...at the outset important to acknowledge that the reference in Luke and in Matthew's Gospels to the sign of Jonah, as it has been interpreted by the church over the centuries...

...as it has been correctly interpreted by the church...

...must first and foremost be understood as a reference to the miracle of Easter...the great sign of Easter...in short, a reference to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Just as Jonah, the runaway prophet, spends 3 days in the belly of the whale, so does our Lord—the Crucified Messiah—spend 3 days in the belly of the earth. And then, just as Jonah is vomited forth by that whale...so is Jesus raised from the dead. Any way of thinking about Christ's reference to the "sign of Jonah" that fails to acknowledge that most obvious connection, is failing to say the thing that ought to be said first.

Nor, I hasten to add, is this talk of resurrection out of place on this Lenten Sunday. I think we sometimes treat Lent as a season much as we tend to treat Holy Week, and that we sometimes treat Holy Week the way in which we tend to treat Good Friday: namely as a season, a week, and a day when we try to "pretend" that we don't know anything about the resurrection. Frankly I regard that is a deeply foolish way to observe these solemn occasions: all of which ought to be observed not in a spirit of make-believe as if we've all forgotten the good news of Easter, but as solemn observances that are embraced in light of the good news of Easter. And so the fact that we have a couple of texts before us...one from the Old Testament describing an experience that foreshadows the resurrection, the other from the New Testament making it explicitly clear that Christ's resurrection will, in fact, recapitulate the experience of the prophet Jonah: none of that ought to be withheld from us simply because it's not yet Easter. The news of Resurrection ought to permeate this place every time we gather for worship: in and out of season, on days of fasting no less than on days of feasting. Christ is the risen Lord. That is no less true today...than it will be two Sundays from now, when we celebrate the feast of the Resurrection. And so whatever else we note about the "sign of Jonah", it was/is/and always shall be a sign that points us to Easter. May God's name be exalted and praised! However!

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I have long had the impression...and frankly a quick perusal this past week of standard interpretations of the story of Jonah in both Church and Synagogue have reinforced that impression...

...I have long had the impression that the story of Jonah is one of the most generally misunderstood stories in scripture. (For what it's worth, incidentally, it's a story I treat as a "story", a brilliant story!, rather than as a history...but we can debate that some other time!). Whether interpreted as story or as history, I always find myself dissatisfied with the interpretations into which I bump: interpretations that seem to overlook what strikes me as the most remarkable aspect of Jonah's story. And so Jewish interpretation tends to focus on the fact that this is a story of repentance since, at the end of the day, the people of Nineveh do respond to the preaching of Jonah with repentance to. For what it's worth, that's a correct interpretation although it does not (as far as I am concerned) go far enough. On the other hand, Christian interpretations (beyond the obvious connection between Jonah's "resurrection" and Christ's) tend to focus on the fact that Jonah disobeyed God: failed to discharge the call that God laid upon him, and thereby suffered the consequence of that disobedience until God succeeded in changing Jonah's heart and mind. That too is a correct interpretation although it too fails (as far as I am concerned) to go far enough. Because what both interpretations fail to explore, is the identity...the identity!...of the people to whom God sent Jonah...given that it is the identity of the Ninevites that causes Jonah to disobey God's command. Jonah's resistance is not an abstract resistance to an abstract call, any more than the anger Jonah expresses at the end of the story is an abstract anger: spurred on when the Ninevites immediately repent in response to his preaching. He is angry for the simple reason that the Ninevites—residents of the capital city of the Assyrians—were his people's enemies. Here's the thing.

When you hear about the 10 lost tribes, the reason those tribes were lost and remain lost is because the Northern Kingdom—Israel (home to those 10 lost tribes)—was invaded by Assyria: with the Kings of Israel initially becoming vassals of the King of Assyria. And when one of those Israelite Kings foolishly sought to get out from under the thumb of Assyria, Israel was invaded and sent into exile. To command Jonah to preach repentance in the capital city of Assyria would be no different than to command a Jew to preach repentance in Berlin in 1946...no different from commanding a survivor of Nagasaki (the largest Christian community in Japan) to preach repentance in Washington, D.C. in that same year of our Lord, 1946...no different than ordering a runaway slave to preach repentance to white-folks in Savannah, Georgia in 1866...no different than sending a victim of the Armenian genocide to preach the Gospel in downtown Istanbul in 1926. Jonah's disobedience...his defiance of God's command...has nothing to do with laziness...has nothing to do with a general desire to disobey God. It is a specific defiance directed at a specific command issued at a particular time and place within a specific context: which is to say that it is very much like all of God's commands. And in this case...in this instance...in this context...Jonah

has been asked to preach judgment and grace to his enemies: in short, to preach salvation to those he despised. And that is the very last thing Jonah is prepared to do.

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A sign can mean many things. A sign most certainly can mean more than one thing. The sign of Jonah? Without a doubt it serves in Matthew and Luke as a pointer to the resurrection. But we do a disservice to the richness and complexity and multi-layered nature of the Gospel...

...we do a disservice to Jesus...

...if we fail to note that the sign of Jonah also points...also points to a dimension of Christ's preaching and a dimension of the Church Christ helped to found, if we fail to note that God's mission-in-Christ involves outreach to those who regularly turn their back on God. After all: if we are going to locate ourselves in this story, how can we not cast ourselves in the role of the Ninevites: those who are quite content most of the time to live our lives as if we were a law unto ourselves, as if we were our own creators. Or, failing that: how can we not cast ourselves in the role of Jonah: those who much prefer speaking good news to those we love, rather than those to whom we are indifferent let alone those we hate. In stark contrast: God's mission to humanity...God's outreach to us in Jesus...ought to serve as a continual reminder that the God we worship is always eager...always willing, ready and able...to reach across enemy lines: the very lines Jonah was so reluctant to cross.

And it goes without saying...although it had best be said...that the mission of the Church, when it is prepared to be honest to the Gospel and thereby honest to God, is—much like God's own mission—also a mission that involves reaching out across enemy lines. The church at its most vibrant, you see...

...the church when it is most authentically itself...

...is when the church incorporates the full measure of humanity. When the church subtly or not so subtly finds ways to send the message that its doors are really only open for "its kind of people", the Gospel is thereby not only tarnished but in a very real sense negated. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*ⁱⁱⁱ That's the Apostle Paul at his most passionate: and nowhere is he a better interpreter of the risen Christ, than when he emphasizes the universality...

...the universality of God's call in Christ.

And you know. I would be something of an idiot...a terribly naïve idiot, at that...were I to pretend that any of that comes easily. It is only natural for us...only natural for us...to cluster with people who are similar to us. But that, you see, is why there is something deeply unnatural about the Gospel: a Gospel that calls on us not

only to love our neighbours as ourselves, but far more threateningly, that calls on us to love our enemies. Even our enemies. And yes: while it may be true that in much of life we can get by, simply by “doin’ a’what comes naturally”...^{iv}

...in the Church of Jesus Christ, God’s ultimate call to us involves us not so much in the way of nature, but rather represents a call to the way of “super-nature”, which is to say God calls us to the way of grace...a way that challenges and transcends our human nature, our earth-bound instincts. Much in the same way that God called Jonah...to transcend his instinctive nature. The way God sent Jesus...sent Jesus to offer himself in a way that pushed the boundaries of what any human being could naturally be expected to do, could “reasonably” be expected to do on behalf of others. Sending him as an emblem of God’s inconceivably lavish love...and then—in the aftermath—establishing and upholding the Church as an echo...as an outpost...as an emblem in its own right and yes: as an enduring sign of hope...

...a sign that points to the deep unity of the human family. Its deep unity, as it was in the beginning. Its deep unity, as it is now, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. And yes, humanity’s ultimate unity in Christ: as it evermore shall be...world without end.

Amen!

ⁱ Ephesians 1:10

ⁱⁱ Mark 8:12

ⁱⁱⁱ Galatians 3:28

^{iv} Irving Berlin from “Annie Get Your Gun”