

First Friend Church, a Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
August 16, 2020
Clarity versus Certainty
Jonah 1:1-3a, 4, 12, 17, 2:1-2, 10, 3:5, 8-10, 4:1-3, 5-7, 9-11

Selected verses from the Jonah story

1Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. ⁴But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹⁷But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. ²Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying, “I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. ¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” ¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

⁴But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. ⁶The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.

⁹But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Message

What makes a story sacred is every time we hear it in whole or in part more is revealed. We heard selected verses of Jonah’s story and there is a lot here. Who and what do you think the story is about? Perhaps it is Jonah’s disobedience, fear

and pagan sailors, or providence in the big fish. Maybe it is sin and repentance of Ninevah's people and animals. Could it be ecology, God's mercy or changeability?

Perhaps you discount this story- "Swallowed by a big fish, Hah!" Yet James Bartley was swallowed by a sperm whale in February, 1891. After 15 hours in the whale's belly he never went to sea again.¹ I bet Jonah didn't either. Lesson? Don't get on a boat when you are fleeing God. A Bible study says it is all about God giving us second chances.² Another resource reports Jonah is read on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. It contains a "universalistic outlook; sin as moral sin, responsibility and accountability, repentance by deeds and transformation of character, infinite preciousness of all living things ... The sympathetic characters are all pagans, while the anti-hero misunderstands the true nature of ... God... He is the one God must teach a lesson in compassion..."³

Another writer says it is something we see today. "Jonah's problem is that he is a racist and a nationalist. 'My people don't like Ninevites or any Assyrians... They have a different religion.. a different race.'"⁴ Another says it is about feelings that surface in our elections., "... actively awaiting and licking our lips over the potential destruction of this or that group..."⁵ Still another points out "evil" in Jonah is not hedonistic immorality. It is injustice - violence against others.⁶

These are helpful interpretations but not the message I heard. What I heard is a whole lot of certainty. Jonah was certain he knew what God should do, right and wrong, who was "in and God should obey him. His "prayer" shows certainty God would rescue him and that pouting under a bush was certain to get God to agree.

The sailors were also certain their gods' anger needed to be appeased by throwing Jonah overboard. Note: Jonah missed the chance to witness to God's love with them -big time. The Ninevites were certain repenting in sack cloth and ashes would avoid punishment even if God didn't want all that. The big fish was certain he would get lunch but also got indigestion. Even God was certain; Ninevah would repent, and Jonah would be grateful for all God did. They did, he wasn't.

Jonah clearly didn't disobey God because he was afraid. His problem was certainty. He tells God, "I was certain you'd lovingly embrace them and I am certain that's not how God should be!" I saw this backhanded compliment certainty in the movie *The Road to Edmond*. Pastor Cleo is put on leave by elders who demand in no uncertain terms he issue God's rebuke to a person who came out to him. Larry asks him, "What does this certainty say about God?" Later the

¹ <https://www.ycaol.com/swallowed.htm#:~:text=The%20records%20of%20the%20British%20Admiralty%20testify%20that,the%20ordea%20and%20this%20is%20his%20amazing%20tale.>

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-stories/jonah-and-the-whale.html>

³ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/jonah-and-the-whale/> Jonah and the Whale: Why the Book of Jonah Is Read on Yom Kippur" by Nahum Sarma originally appeared in the August 1990 issue of *Bible Review*. It was republished in Bible History Daily on September 20, 2015.

⁴ <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2018/01/15/nineveh-that-hole-place/>

⁵ https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-3b-2/?type=old_testament_lectionary

⁶ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/jonah-and-the-whale/>

senior pastor tells Cleo he respects his courage but he certainly can't risk his job. Larry explodes, "He respects your courage?! What about the girl who came to you wanting to know she is loved by God because she is exactly who God made her to be...? He would hate for his religious convictions to cost anything!" The result of Cleo's church's certainty is "[so many people] assume they are not good enough, aren't loved as they are..." Lives are lost. In uncertain, divisive times I realize our clarity that God is love and there is that of God in every one overrides "certainty." And as followers of the crucified Jesus it is clear our convictions may cost us.

We all want to be certain but we always live with uncertainty. Certainty says I know what is right and exactly what will happen. It can close us off to new possibilities and Spirit-led moments. It sets us up for fear, denial, disappointment and failure. Waiting for certainty can delay decisions and paralyze us as individuals and as a community. When I have to be certain every issue and decision seems so important I let it stop me from taking any action at all.

What is more important is clarity. Clarity says I know who I am and how I am grounded. I know my values and where to get direction. If we have clarity, even in the face of uncertainty we can move forward. I remembered the advice Bill Wright gave Deanna Woirhaye. When we need clarity in answering Spirit's leadings to meet the many needs of people suffering, "Do what speaks loudest."

Do it. Then, be open to making mid-course corrections. No decision has to be final -it simply gets us moving forward so we can get more clarity as we go. A wonderful example is the work our meeting and school did and is doing in facing the "reopening" question. We did the work of identifying our highest value- first do what love requires- keep Friends and school safe. Then we figured out next steps. From a place of clarity, we are ready to pivot and take any required action.

You and I need to continue on this road; to deepen our listening, to center in our values, to be open and clear in Spirit's leadings. For the near future and into the years to come; to understand where we individually and our meeting is going. How we need to be and what we need to start now. We will not always get it right, but we will learn on the way. We cannot be certain, but we can have clarity about what is truly important to God, to us as a person, and to us as a community.⁷

On a driving vacation in Ireland with my best friend we were on the way to Shannon. It was early evening when we passed through the middle of a colorful set of buildings- not really a town. We were stopped by a police officer at a barricade. He was very welcoming, asked where we were going and sent us on our way. I remarked to my friend that it was a strange place for an open air visitor center.

As we drove up the hillside the sun quickly set. And then the fog set in. Not just the light fog that usually brings a drizzle of rain here. The fog of the horror

⁷ With assistance from Scott Wagoner email, Pat Lencioni podcast, "Plant a friggin' tree."

films when you just know, “there be monsters.” I kept driving but slowed down. A car passed going the other way. Headlines shined in my rear view mirror so I gave room to pass and they did- at a normal pace that now seemed like speeding.

Soon my friend asked why I was driving at a snail’s pace with the window rolled down. I could not see two feet in front of the car! The yellow line in the middle of the road was long gone. The fog only got thicker. Then I felt and heard the car’s tires hit gravel. I wasn’t certain we were even still on the road and I froze and stopped the car. My friend said, “what are you doing?!” I said “I am afraid we will go off a cliff next.” It was clear we were not safe and clear I needed direction. So we started to pray. Then a car passed us driving as though it were broad daylight. A sign, a help, a way.

I followed that car all the way to the hotel but when we arrived it just disappeared. I practically threw the keys at the valet in relief, wanting to kiss the ground. We learned the road was a barely navigable single lane mountain road in pea soup fog. I had no certainty but it was clear to me, God led all the way.

God said to Jonah, “should I not be concerned about Nineveh... in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” It is clear God is concerned about each of us and all the suffering in the United States and the world, where it is clear some of us do not know our right hand from our left. I have very little certainty what I am to do about it. I have been reading some Black Theology and that has given me some clarity.

I do not know all the answers, in fact I do not see all the problems. I do not suffer as others do, but many are suffering. The fact I will not see glory in my lifetime does not exempt me from working toward the beloved community. I am not certain when we should meditate, educate, legislate, motivate, or mediate but it is clear they are all needed in turn. I am clear the kingdom is coming. I am clear it is my responsibility help build it. I am clear God is here, Jesus is here, Spirit is here, giving me and us strength for the work.

It is clear glory is coming. I don’t need to be certain when it will arrive.

What are you "clear" about? How does that "clarity" shape how you "show up" and offer ministry / presence?