

“Question Me an Answer”

The late Biblical scholar and theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, “Don’t start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks.”¹ Whether those questions are obvious or implied. Two of our scriptures today pose questions about what fairness is. What is justice? What is mercy? Because these issues are looked at from various viewpoints, we are challenged in how we respond to them.

The Jonah story is one of my favorites in the Bible. Most people only remember the part of Jonah being in the belly of the big fish. But there is so much more to this fable than a fish story. It is Jonah’s foolish attempt to run away from God, his grouchy response about how the Ninevites respond to his message, his sulking when they are saved, and his inability to understand the lesson God is teaching him. Starting with the beginning of the book, we get the story of a righteous prophet who is self-righteous. He also thinks he knows better than God.

At the beginning, God calls Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. He is to preach to them that they must mend their evil ways or they will be destroyed. Jonah thinks that is exactly what they deserve and does not want to convert them. But he thinks that God, whom he believes to be merciful, will forgive their sins if his preaching is successful.

God tells Jonah to get on a boat to Nineveh. Jonah goes down to the port and gets on a ship to Tarshish. If you looked at a map, you would realize that Tarshish is in the opposite direction from Nineveh. Jonah is determined to foil God’s plan to forgive the wicked people of Nineveh. God is not so easily outwitted by a mere mortal.

While Jonah is at sea, remember he is traveling in the opposite direction from Nineveh; the Lord sends a great storm. The sailors are freaked out. They are certain they will die. In contrast, the captain of the ship finds Jonah in the hold of the ship, fast asleep. The captain scolds him. Then Jonah realizes that what is going on is his fault. It is because he is running away from God that the storm has overtaken the ship. Selflessly, he tells his fellow travelers that the storm will stop if they throw him overboard. So they do. That is how Jonah ends up being swallowed by a big fish.

Inside the fish, Jonah does not get digested but sits in contemplation. He knows he erred by trying to foil God’s plans. He repents, and the fish vomits² him up onto the shore, which is near Nineveh. Jonah plods toward Nineveh intent on doing what God told him to do, but his heart is not in it.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* [Nashville: Zondervan, 1993]

² Many translations read “spewed,” but vomited a better translation. Perhaps that was too indelicate for the translators.

When he gets to Nineveh, he walks through the city shouting, “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Not exactly an inspiring or even believable sermon. There is no nuance, metaphor, simile, or homiletic technique. He just shouts the same words over and over again as he walks through this great city. A city so vast that it takes him days to cross it. Just as Jonah predicted, the wicked people of Nineveh immediately repent. They clothe themselves in sackcloth and ashes and follow their king outside the city walls in repentance.

Most preachers try a lot harder than Jonah and would be ecstatic if even a fraction of those people responded by repenting and turning to the Lord. Not Jonah. He knows that his success means that God will forgive their wickedness because of his successful evangelism. Instead of celebrating their repentance or the goodness of God’s mercy, he sits in the sun and sulks. He is so annoyed with the Lord that he says he would rather die than have to endure this.

Instead of killing him, God has a plant grow up overnight that shades Jonah. Then, God has a worm come and consume it. Jonah mourns. God asks him how it is that he mourns the loss of this plant yet is angry that God forgave thousands of people whose wickedness was due to their cluelessness. Doesn’t God have a responsibility to the people whom he made? Is it Jonah’s right to decide the fate of other people because he views them as his enemy? The questions are tough, and the answers are left unsaid.

In Jesus’ parable, he tells of a landowner who goes into the marketplace every few hours hiring people to work his fields. He promises every one of them a fair wage. When the day is done, he pays the workers starting with those who worked the least up to those who worked the most. When he pays those who worked only an hour a full day’s wages, those who worked longer get greedy, thinking they will get a bonus for the long day. Instead, they get the same pay.

This is a hard one. It is even harder than the Jonah story. We want God’s forgiveness for our sins because we know they are many. But we also want to feel we have been fairly compensated for the work we have done. Whether that work is in the fields of a landowner or the fields of the Lord.

Jesus instead poses a question about God’s mercy. If God chooses to forgive everyone, is it up to me who is forgiven? If I am righteous my whole life, is my life worth any more to God than that of another whom God created? I have told you before about the SSJE brother who taught at St. Stephen’s Church. He went up to one person in the audience and said, “You know, when God looks at you, God says, ‘You are my favorite.’ Then when God looks at the next person, God says, ‘You are my favorite.’” The point is not that God is fickle but that God’s ability to love is infinite. God is not limited in the way we are. God has an infinite number of favorites, because God loves all of creation.

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Holy Eucharist, Rite Two 10:00 a.m.
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However, that is not the lesson. The lesson is the questions we ask as we hear and read these scriptures. How do we grow as we ponder the questions? What gifts are we given as we wonder about the foolishness of Jonah and the generosity of the landowner? Life is a highway, and we learn as we move along the way from what we see, hear, and experience, both good and bad, and how all of these help us to grow more fully into the person God created us to be.