

SERMON, August 20, 2023, First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield
Title: "The Other End" Dan Crump

When we began planning pulpit coverage for Pastor Laurie's sabbatical, we were looking at, not a "month uh Sundays," but three months of Sundays. Happily, we eventually celebrated as we watched the dates fill up with some amazing people, some of whom traveled great distance to bring us God's word. We still have Pastor Kerri Parker from the Wisconsin Council of Churches to look forward to, next Sunday, both in worship and for a very special Forum for All. You can read about it in the bulletin and eblast announcements. And then, Pastor Jorge Ramirez and his prophetic voice the following Sunday. Stay tuned!

But in those early dates, we wondered, and prayed. Early on, Pastor Laurie said, "Dan, you have never done a series. How about doing a three-parter?" "Okay," I said, tentatively. "Pencil me in." Well, God's abundance, and the fact that we have so many wonderful and diverse voices in our midst, spared us all from that third cup of Dan. But not the second. So, Dan, part 2. Hopefully, last Sunday, I got the hot and juicy parts off my chest so I can focus on what I originally imagined this series is all about.

A year or so ago, the New York Times ran a poignant and beautifully written op-ed by Jennifer Senior about Philip Brickman, a social psychologist who co-authored a famous study which surveyed those with strokes of what we would regard as either very good or very bad luck to compare their levels of happiness. The surprising conclusion of the study was that neither of these strokes of luck produced significant changes, either up or down, in happiness. Perhaps happiness was less situational than we think, and maybe not all that involved in how our lives and behavior are shaped.

Brickman was working on a book that would be published posthumously under the title, Commitment, Conflict, and Caring, when he succumbed in 1982 to a lifelong struggle with depression at the age of 38. His legacy would establish multiple disciplines in social psychology, but he would rarely be mentioned. My copy of his book is stamped, "Withdrawn," from the Allegheny College library. I am happy to have saved this one from the landfill. I hope it eventually earns another printing and renewed attention.

I think we all struggle with the tendency, maybe it's a human trait, to oversell our convictions. The recent interest in Elizabeth Holmes and her now disgraced medical company, Theranos, really struck me. She was doing what most dot com startups do, overselling a product still in development to attract investors, and to have a market in place once the product is ready for rollout; she just did the selling better than the developing, and went to jail for it. It begs the question, can any concern be heard in today's shouting world without stepping beyond what we know and asserting a confidence we deep down just might suspect we don't really have? We commit to positions, sometimes with militant ferocity, without ever asking why we are so sure, even when they are not in our long term interest, and especially when so many others seem just as sure as we are, but from the other side. Every day reveals the consequences of this apocalyptic posturing from mere incivility to open conflict, and the work of our collective survival goes undone.

This was Philip Brickman's project. His book, and this sermon opportunity, led me to consider two scriptures that reflect this crisis. The first one, last Sunday, was the Book of Revelation, a basement diatribe, in the name of God, calling for the fiery judgment of one's ideological foes. This week I want to focus on the story of Jonah, the story of a prophet who brings a forecast of divine judgment to his enemies that does not happen.

Let me refresh what are, I am sure, well-worn memories. God tells Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, the empire that started all of the Israelites' troubles, to announce that their evil has gotten so bad, God is about to destroy them. Jonah responds quickly by hiring a boat to Tarshish, which is to say, as far in the other direction as possible. God sends a storm; the sailors reluctantly toss him out to lighten the karmic load, and the sea ceases from its fury; a fish swallows him and for the next three days transports him safely back to dry land.

And now, today's second scripture reading, selected verses from the last two chapters of the book of Jonah,

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying,

“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city,
and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk.

And he cried out, “Forty days more,
and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And the people of Nineveh believed God;
they proclaimed a fast, and

everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did,

how they turned from their evil ways,

God changed his mind about the calamity that he said
he would bring upon them;

and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah,

and he became angry.

He prayed to the Lord and said,

“O Lord! Is this not what I said while I was in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish in the beginning;

for I knew you are a gracious God

and merciful, slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love,

and ready to relent from punishing.

And now, O Lord, please take my life from me,

for it is better for me to die than to live.”

And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?

And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city,

in which there are more than twenty thousand persons

who do not know their right hand from their left,

and also many animals?”

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for the word of God among us,
Thanks be to God.

The book of Jonah is almost as weird in its scriptural context as John's Apocalypse. Written, according to most scholars, from between 200 and 500 years after the historical person named Jonah supposedly lived, a huge span of time, it recounts the story of Jonah rather than his prophecies unlike all the other biblical prophets, apart from the single sentence,

“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the book of Jonah is the only one that specifically says that Jonah’s prophecy does not come true. If Jonah were the model for all the biblical prophets from Isaiah and Jeremiah all the way through to Malachi, they would have to end with a postscript, “By the way, turns out I was wrong about all of this. Oops.”

As the first scripture reading revealed, Jesus felt an affinity for Jonah’s story, because, according to Matthew, they would both share three days and three nights similarly dead then similarly resurrected. Luke’s Jesus also relates the sign of Jonah bit, but leaves off the fishy connection, granting us access to the traditional Hebrew reading of Jonah which focuses on the extravagant lengths to which God goes to forgive, and possibly our tendency to think God fights our battles, and we fight God’s.

Wading through commentaries speculating what kind of fish or whale or some primordial creature swallows Jonah and, rather than digesting him, sustains him underwater for three days before depositing him safely on dry land, I stumbled upon something I do not remember seeing before. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the name, Nineveh, is thought to have referred to a patron goddess, named Nina or Ninua. In the pictographic written language of Assyria, that entity, the patron goddess of Nineveh, is represented by the picture of a fish, alluding possibly to a great fishing hole in a bend in the Tigris River near where Nineveh was built. A fish. Hello. Did no one ever think this might be relevant to Jonah’s story?

Last week, I cited theologian Catherine Keller’s brilliant take on Revelation titled, Facing Apocalypse. She encourages a practice of dreamreading to open ourselves to as yet unrealized possibilities, possibilities unencumbered by our default empirical, objective way of thinking, that locks us strictly into linear cause and effect, dependent upon our own abilities and actions to directly effect our salvation from the mighty host of crises we, along with every being on the planet, are facing. What if we are not facing devastation alone? What if Jonah’s underwater Uber driver somehow implied that even the fish had a stake in the possibility that God’s message would lead to repentance and redemption, and that it must be rescued from Jonah’s attempt to silence it? Did they somehow know that salvation required not just humans to fast and wear sackcloth, but the animals, too? When Jonah is sulking in the desert just east of the city, a bush comes up to give him shade and a worm causes it to wither exposing him once again to the hot sun. They conspire to teach him that this story is not about providing and protecting the comfort of his assumptions. I’d like to point out that the very last word in the book of Jonah is “animals.”

Revelation, as well, teems with wide-eyed witnesses from the natural world echoing Paul’s words in Romans 8:21 and 22, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains, in hope that it will be set free from its bondage to destruction.” There are the all-seeing creatures, a lion, an ox, an eagle and “a creature with a human face,” that surround the throne of heaven, there is the whole earth that absorbs the fiery dragon’s attack on the woman clothed with the sun, and there is the tree that grows on both sides of the river of the water of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

But it’s the eagle, flying in midheaven, in Revelation 8:13, and crying in a loud voice that gets my attention. The eagle’s cry, translated “woe, woe, woe,” sounds like a self-righteous clucking tongue pronouncing a judgment while repeating the old lie, “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.” The original Greek word translated woe is “*ouai*,” the soul-deep expression of grief for what has and has not yet transpired. It reminds me of the whippoorwill, an almost never-seen bird in these parts, that camped in a tree in our backyard and repeated its call incessantly for a solid half hour the evening of the day my nephew died of a fentanyl

overdose. Given the tension we humans create between divine omnipotence and divine goodness, Keller suggests, “Perhaps God’s grief can only be heard, be felt, through an animal.”

Perhaps, dreamreading Jonah, that Ni-neh-fish was an expression of an awakening conscience borne of a doubt gnawing at the lower strata of Nineveh’s society that invading their neighbors, destroying their cultures, and absorbing their wealth was not a long term strategy. There is of course no historical record of Nineveh ever repenting in the slightest way, let alone the nearly comic way the Jonah story presents. But we do know the Assyrian empire was short-lived as their Babylonian, Median, Persian, Chaldean, Scythian, and Cimmerian neighbors eventually rose up to put them in their place. Was there a quiet decision, maybe lurking as deep as that cool, dark bend in the Tigris River to make sure the judgment was heard in the hope of forestalling its execution? We cannot know in any historical sense, but in our own time, perhaps we wish we’d listened to the nagging doubts about Vietnam, and Iraq, and a host of other actions taken in our name.

Philip Brickman defined commitment as “a force that stabilizes individual behavior under circumstances where the individual would otherwise be tempted to change that behavior.”

He considered commitment to be an “almost magical mechanism that converts the inevitable pain and dissatisfaction in life into purpose and meaningfulness.” Commitment, he says, derives from a choice (a positive element), an awareness of the negative features of that choice (a negative element), and responsibility for any negative consequences that occur in acting on that choice. He argues that commitment is necessary for mental health. It promotes a sense of well-being, it helps provide meaning in times of stress, and commitment allows us to adapt to a changing external world to complete the tasks necessary to living.

Commitment transforms rational thought, which requires the consideration of all available alternatives, into effective action, which requires the pursuit of only one alternative. For this reason, he says, “all behavior must to a degree be based on logically inadequate grounds,” on an uncertain certainty. Brickman contends that our actions create intrinsic values, not because of the positive reasons to choose an action, but because of the negative elements, the uncertainties and sacrifices accepted, the temptations and distractions resisted. Conventional thought says that our values shape our actions, but Brickman is saying the reverse, our actions create our intrinsic values. In other words, intrinsic value is, in a sense, purchased by the sacrifices made and risks accepted in any action.

But commitment has its dark sides. He cites many studies from the silly to the horrible in which over-commitment can produce the effect of what we sometimes call “throwing good money after bad” because the intrinsic value of giving up a few pennies or causing another human to suffer goes up when the negative features become more negative. Patently crazy, even violent ideas can appear attractive precisely because of the social risk they entail. And for all the mental health benefits commitment offers, a loss of commitment, when doubts creep in or when the sacrifice made suddenly overwhelms our fragile certainty, amounts to a loss of intrinsic value, the very thing that makes life worth living and protecting.

I don’t think it falls far from Philip Brickman’s conclusions to suggest that John’s Apocalypse which calls for extreme divine violence to treat extreme human violence is a testimony to over-commitment. Jonah’s despair at God’s withholding of Nineveh’s judgment is a perfect example of a lost commitment and a critical loss of intrinsic value for his life and the lives of all the Ninevites, including the animals. Perhaps these two stories can serve as guardrails as we create the commitments that make our lives worth living, and allow for our commitments to change when they do not.

Last week, we looked at how apocalypse thinking, whether divine, technological, or ironic, is inescapable. Catherine Keller says, "The dangerous hope for a final, one-off destruction and salvation persists. It feeds the presumption that history and nature move down linear tracks to the Last Stop. Because it exercises great cultural force, that presumption of the End needs to be repeatedly deconstructed." Deconstructed is a ten dollar word that simply means looking at our commitments, examining how they came to be, and asking "is this still doing what we created it to do?"

This old earth has hosted many worlds, human, animal, vegetable, and mineral. It has seen many come and go. It has witnessed our attempts to learn how to live here always holding out an opportunity to try again to get it right. But we are seeing signs that opportunities might run out, for our species at least. This might be the last chance, but there may be many last chances. As the saying goes, "The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best time is now." Last Sunday, we witnessed paradise burn to the ground. This Sunday, we witness a hurricane threatening a desert. Will we wait until the last chance is here? How will we know it is the last?