



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Atonement - Standing at the Gate of Hope

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October 11, 2009

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Since we are having an animal blessing after the service today, and the theological theme of the month is atonement, and we are just past the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, I thought I would start with a story about a whale. It is always good to have a story about a whale at the beginning of a year, whether near the beginning of our program year or the Jewish liturgical year. So a story about a whale ...

No, not that one, and not Boris either, the whale in William Steig's Amos and Boris, one of my very favorite children's books. No, the whale in the book of Jonah, as Jonah is the traditional text for Yom Kippur. The story from the Hebrew Bible, about a recalcitrant and pretty angry prophet, named Jonah, who was told by God to go to Nineveh, the evil and capital city of the Assyrian Empire and the enemy of Israel, and condemn them. He doesn't want to go, as much as he thinks God is right about Nineveh, so he takes to sea [like that other whale story] and is a stowaway. A storm comes up and Jonah is blamed, or, he takes blame for it, as God is now angry at him for running away. He is tossed overboard, the storm immediately abates, and Jonah is swallowed by a whale.

Let me pause here and give you a back-story. I believe my focus on whales goes way back to when I was pretty young, just a boy in Minneapolis, and the story has to do with fear. I remember this very clearly. Now there are no whales in Minnesota, just so you know. We went to see Pinocchio, at the Nile Theater, and, if you remember the movie, there is a scene where the whale – Monstro - chases Pinocchio and Gepetto after they are sneezed out of the whale. It was frightening, and I dove down – I remember this exactly – between the theater seats.

No doubt it scarred me and my focus on Moby Dick is certainly an attempt to reconcile that event – an atonement of sorts I guess. I did pay attention to my nose after the movie, though, and was very wary of not telling the truth. Jiminy Cricket was my favorite character.

So the story of Jonah brings up some deep feelings for me – the idea of being swallowed into a dark place, of being trapped – maybe that is a feeling you have had too. Or of being chased by some powerful force to do you harm as in Pinocchio, or of the fear of confronting what you have to do, especially when you don't want to do it, as in the story of Jonah. These are human stories – of confronting and avoiding, fight and flight – and they pertain to what we mean by atonement.

A prime definition of atonement is repairing a damaged relationship. Yes? Sound familiar? Ever need to do something to repair a damaged relationship or expect someone to do something to repair a relationship with you? Count the ways, my friends. All of us have done things that have damaged relationships, and all of us have had things done to us damaging relationships.

With parents and siblings, with partners and friends, with our children and co-workers. With our pets even and with the earth itself, and no doubt with our own selves – all these things?

So Jonah is in the belly of the whale and after three days, he repents for disobeying God. God likes this and has the whale spit Jonah up on the land, near Nineveh. Nineveh is in Iraq, in the area where the more modern city of Mosul is, that city that has seen so much fighting and violence in recent history – perhaps a perfect setting for thinking about atonement, atonement for the colonialism that created modern Iraq, for the exploitation of its natural resources, for the brutality of Saddam Hussein, for our war there and the continued violence that engendered.

Maybe with the announcement of President Obama being awarded the Nobel peace Prize, our nation might atone for its wars and its arrogance, its refusal to take leadership in environmental issues, its coddling of dictators. [I thought

there was deep irony that just a few days after refusing to meet with the Dalai Lama, Obama gets the Nobel Peace Prize.] Maybe ...

So Jonah is to go to the gates of Nineveh and condemn them for their evil ways, telling them that God is going to destroy the city. This gives Jonah great pleasure [take that Saddam! – oh the parallels]. But, in another twist, the city repents and so God decides to forgive them. This does not please Jonah and there is back and forth involving a plant that is cursed and blessed, but, in the end, the lesson is clear – repentance, atonement, forgiveness are good things.

Intriguingly, Jonah's name means 'peace' and the story was known by Jesus who refers to it during his teaching – he compares himself to Jonah – the three days in hell apparently like the three days in the whale. This may make sense to you as well – those times in darkness when you feel swallowed up by something, confronting what may be unpleasant, facing what you have fled from. Peace can only come when we re-enter the light – however we accomplish that.

The story is, as said, the traditional text for the afternoon service of Yom Kippur.

In the ancient Hebrew tradition, at this time of the year, around harvest time, and just after the beginning of the New Year, people attempted to make right with their God and to return anew to the ideal of the covenanted community. The Israelites, as individuals and as a people would atone for their sins and their failings. They would ritually wipe the slate clean so that they could move more easily forward into the New Year and begin another cycle of living. Forgiveness

In that ancient festival, the high priest would take a live goat, ritually confess all the sins of the people and lay those sins upon the goat and drive the goat out into the wilderness - cut off from the healing strength of the community.

One of the great contributions of Judaism to our religious understanding is the idea of a god in community, in history, struggling with a people in time. That, for me, is much more profound than monotheism - also attributed to Judaism. But 'God in community' - now that means something. And Yom Kippur is an important expression of that theological claim.

So where does this leave us about atonement – doing something to repair a relationship? I suggest that you start with yourself – this is part of the lesson of Jonah, I believe. Jonah flees responsibility – called to do something, be a certain someone, but he flees and a storm ensues.

That is often the case – fleeing from our own better self a storm follows, and we are swallowed up. These storms do not only endanger us, they endanger those around us. This is what our addictions do for us – they swallow us up when we fail our own self, avoid what we must do, run away from our better selves. Abusing alcohol or drugs or food – these are the whales that swallow us in the storms of our flight from the demands of our lives.

Now there may be some people who have no innate moral sense – there are some true sociopaths, but not many. Most of us here know right from wrong; one of our tasks here is to teach that and reinforce that. So we know when we have done wrong; we know when we violate our own self or when we damage a relationship; we know these things.

But we do violate them – all the times. Mostly in small ways but sometimes in larger ways that require some penance and some act of atonement.

Here are the steps: admit those failings. Atonement and forgiveness only grow out of truthfulness. This is the great lesson of 12 step programs; this is the basis of therapy; this is what confession is – an admittance, a recognition of the wrongs we do – how we wrong ourselves, how we wrong others. Jonah did this in the whale; the city of Nineveh did this. This was behind the great effort in reconciliation in South Africa.

I imagine you get what I am suggesting. What matters, I believe, is that we actually do this. Like Jews on Yom Kippur, we all could take time to atone and make amends – repair relationships. I realize that it isn't always easy and doesn't always work – but it will never work if we don't take the first step.

Here is another way to think about it – this is from some Hopi elders:

There are things to be considered [now]:

Where are you living?

What are you doing?

Are you in right relation?

Where is your water?

Know your garden.

It is time to speak your truth.

Create your community.

Be good to each other.

And do not look outside yourself for the leader.

This could be a good time!

There is a river flowing now very fast.

It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid.

They will try to hold on to the shore.

They will feel they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly.

... The elders say we must let go of the shore,

push off into the middle of the river,

keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.

See who is in there with you and celebrate.

Yom Kippur – the day of atonement, the end of the high holy days for Jews, the days of awe, a time to look within, make amends and then look out. A time to enter the darkness and come back to the land and re[par] relationships.

What do you need to do? For what should you atone? What are you running from? What has swallowed you up? What is pursuing you? Where do you go now?

Whales are good, you know. The largest creatures on earth, big enough to swallow us up and spit us out, big enough to chase us to higher ground – whales can teach us something about honesty and humility – they might be symbols of what we must pass through to get to reconciliation and atonement, to a new vision of life, to possibility, to mercy and compassion, justice and peace.