

July 9th: Man Overboard, part two

Today we continue our journey together into the story of Jonah. I've mentioned the past two weeks that as we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together.

So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

Last week we introduced the second half of Jonah chapter 1. Today we return to the action and will spend some time in further reflection.

But before we do so, I invite you to pray with me.

Creator God,

In the midst of our uncertainty, we hold fast to the promises that you have made your people. We grapple with so many anxieties, so much grief, and so we come into your presence in need of resolution and peace. We think of the sacrifices that

we have had to make in our lives, and we recall that you too have made sacrifices on our behalf. Guide into needed clarity this morning, shepherd us into greater understanding of ourselves and others. Be with us as we continue to navigate your holy text and what it means for us today. Amen.

I had no idea when I started planning for this sermon series that various forms of our media would be inundated with ocean related news over the past few weeks.

First, it was reported that orcas all over the world have learned how to attack boats and are actively targeting vessels in multiple areas of the globe. Have you heard about this? Apparently there is an orca named White Gladis who is responsible for what journalists and marine scientists are now calling an uprising—and it has recently been documented that White Gladis could have been pregnant when this all started back in 2020. While White Gladis has now given birth to her calf, her local pod of orcas off the coast of the Iberian Peninsula has taken to imitating her aggressive behavior.

Now we've heard eleven reports of similar behavior by orcas off the coast of Normandy in France, as well as one incident in the North Sea, near Scotland's Shetland Islands. It seems like this uprising is growing! As someone who rides a ferry across the Puget Sound a few times per week, this makes me a little uneasy. I guess I wouldn't be terribly mad if the orcas decided to play some water polo with Jeff Bezos' megayacht, but I really hope that they leave me alone!

Second, we heard that the Titan submersible that intended to explore the wreck of the Titanic suffered a catastrophic failure that resulted in the death of five people. While many have speculated about the cause of this implosion and the potentially compromised carbon fiber hull that contributed to the Titan's untimely demise, others have taken to squabbling over the ethics of such a tourist expedition and the optics of billionaires spending \$250,000 per person on such a voyage when Flint, MI still doesn't have clean drinking water and

inflation is resulting in many families and individuals in our nation going without basic needs. Without a doubt, the loss of human life is tragic, and still, some have argued that the outcry and collective grief that has been expressed about this particular tragedy has vastly overshadowed other recent events—including ones where the death toll was exponentially higher.

One such event, which you might not have heard about, was a recent tragedy in the Mediterranean Sea, the same location that our story of Jonah takes place in. A Greek-owned fishing trawler carrying 750 Pakistani, Syrian, Palestinian, and Egyptian migrants and refugees capsized after the Hellenic Coast Guard attempted to tow it to safety after the ship ran out of water and conditions aboard deteriorated. The ship was originally set off from Libya with the intention of landing in Italy, but current reports now say that only 104 of the boat's passengers have been rescued alive, with the remaining passengers either missing, dead, or unidentifiable. The media coverage of this shipwreck has been limited—as so few survivors are willing to share their stories for fear of retribution by the Greek authorities, or are in shock after such a devastating ordeal.

All in all, it's a lot of news that seems vaguely or directly parallel to our biblical narrative of Jonah, don't you think? Our friend Jonah is certainly no stranger to a desperate situation at sea, and so I wondered how our biblical author would respond to these modern events.

Last week we read verses 11 through 16 of Jonah chapter 1, and we heard that Jonah and his traveling companions ultimately decided that throwing him overboard was the solution to their own terrifying ordeal. Although the sailors were originally against committing this act of murder, it seemed like this human sacrifice ended up solving the issues—after Jonah was tossed into the waves, the seas immediately calmed down and all the sailors responded to this miracle by becoming followers of the God of Israel.

But I had a few questions that left me feeling unsettled, and I think many of us walked away from that passage thinking that it contained some pretty problematic theology.

Here are the questions I posed in my meditation last week:

What's the deal with correlating normal weather events with divine anger or cosmic displeasure?

Why would God endanger dozens of other human beings for the sake of punishing only one for disobedience?

How is literal human sacrifice the best answer for appeasing God's wrath?

What kind of God would allow his beloved creation to die a frightening death because of one mistake?

Aren't we supposed to be following a loving, compassionate, merciful God?

I said last week that I didn't really have any good answers to these questions, and surprise surprise, I still don't. That being said, I certainly have some thoughts, and some reflections from my own time of prayer and contemplation, so I hope that we can continue to reflect and dig deeper together. I guess that what I find so fascinating and compelling about our biblical text is that it allows us to wrestle with these big questions and divine mysteries in ways that help us find meaning in our own lives and in our own settings around the world.

Two weeks ago we engaged in a spiritual practice called a "Self Inventory," which was a practice of listening for God's voice and learning how to hear and discern God's calling for each of us. This kind of exercise tends to work best for people who are highly auditory—meaning that they receive and share a lot of information through hearing, speaking, singing, or otherwise vocalizing their thoughts.

But today I wanted to share a practice for those of us who are highly visual—meaning that our sense of sight is important to our experience of spirituality or is part of our engagement with each other and with the divine.

Many of you know that I'm a big fan of art, and specifically a big fan of incorporating art into worship and spirituality. Against my parents advice, I majored in Art History in college, but jokes on them, because now I'm gainfully employed AND I get to use my love of art in my work!

So today we're going to be meditating together on some artwork that I recently discovered online and has deeply resonated with me--so I hope that it will resonate with you as well. I think it speaks to some of the questions that haunt me--I think it brings this journey on the sea into sharper focus.

The artist that caught my eye is Shamsia Hassani, the first known female graffiti artist in Afghanistan. Recently featured in the Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, Huffington Post, and the Harvard International Review, Shamsia's work is having a profound impact on the world, drawing attention to current events, politics, and emerging cultural trends. Shamsia uses an unusual medium, spray paint, to capture the intense emotions and life experiences of humanity, all with vivid color and subtle texture.

When we begin, you'll first see the full piece on the screen, then it will cycle through with closer up photos of the original image. It will cycle through more than once, so you'll have plenty of time to see each slide multiple times. As we reflect, you are welcome to use the worksheets that were created for this morning--but if you'd rather just sit and contemplate without writing anything down, that's just completely fine too.

If you're using the worksheets, you'll see that there are three questions to help frame your contemplation. They are: what did I notice about these images? What emotions did these images create in me? And how might God be speaking to me through these images? You might reflect on current events and listen for God to speak into those situations as well.

Like two weeks ago, there will be some quiet and contemplative music playing as we engage with the artwork, so I'm going to invite you to find a comfortable position and take a few deep breaths as we prepare to enter into this time of

reflection. After the music ends, we'll come back together and see what has risen to the surface.

Sounds good? Wonderful, let's begin.

Meg cues music and powerpoint

Welcome back friends. What did you think of these images? Thumbs up, thumbs down, somewhere in the middle?

I know art isn't always for everyone, and I know that graffiti in particular isn't always the medium that works for all people, but I hope that these images were able to inspire some deeper thought inside of you. I'm curious to know what this piece brought up for you, especially in relation to our Jonah story and the current events that I mentioned.

I wonder if this image brought up feelings of empathy and compassion for anyone who has encountered rough waters—whether literal or metaphorical.

I wonder if it brought up anxiety for you—perhaps this picture of the sinking ship recalled an area in your own life where you feel like you are overwhelmed and barely treading water.

I wonder if this piece of art made you pause to reflect on the human lives that our world has sacrificed—lives lost in the name of capitalism or unjust systems or wars based in intolerance.

I wonder if you silently raged against the pieces of our world that feel so unfair—feeling powerless or discouraged because of the lack of control that we exert over our lives, even though we like to pretend the opposite.

I wonder if it touched a part of our soul, the part deep inside of ourselves where we intuitively know that we belong to something bigger and more

cosmic than just our human systems, institutions, and narrow minded thinking.

I wonder if you questioned where God was in all of this mess—all of this tragedy, all of this greed, all of this uncertainty—I wonder if you looked for God's presence in the paint and in the layers of color.

No matter what came to mind for you during this time of reflection, I hope that this space allowed for a moment of connection with the divine, whatever that means for you.

So in closing, I think our relationship to God has come a long way in the past three thousand years. I don't think any of us currently believes that God sends hurricanes to punish people, or that God wants us to live miserable lives because of the mistakes of our past. So rather than seeing this story through the framework of those questions I posed last week, I think I have some better questions for us to consider.

As you enter a new week, and potentially face storms of your own—how might God be offering calmness, even if it seems unexpected? In the depths of our despair over the brokenness of our human systems, how is God reaching out to us with peace that passes all understanding? How should we share those gifts with our fellow human beings who are also struggling and also living in anxiety?

Most of all my friends, I hope we can remember that this still isn't the end of the story—there is still grace and love waiting for Jonah, and there is always grace and love waiting for us.

Amen.