

Wednesday February 8, 2012

The man who wouldn't forgive

By Jim Taylor

I had another column drafted for today. Then my friend Alan Reynolds sent his e-mail column *Reynolds Rap*, exploring the biblical book of Jonah. Jonah, says Alan, is “the man who wouldn't forgive.”

Jonah is a short book – just four chapters. It tells an unbelievable story -- about a man swallowed by a great fish and regurgitated back on shore; about a megapolis of 120,000 people, at the time the biggest city in the world, who repented en masse; about a plant that grew enough in a single day to give shade and then withered overnight....

Ignore the details! They're deliberate exaggerations, surpassing even Bill Cosby's wildest imagination. “Jonah was never intended as an historical account,” Alan explains. “It is rather a satirical gem....”

Look instead at the sweep of the story. Ninevah was the capital of the ruthless Assyrian empire – in Jewish eyes, the home of all evil. And God wanted Jonah – a Jew, a victim of Assyrian oppression – to go to Ninevah to tell the people that God would destroy them.

Jonah did not want that assignment. He tried to run away. But he couldn't. So he went to Ninevah, and proclaimed a message he was sure the Assyrians would ignore. But they didn't. They repented. Jonah still expected God to punish them. But God didn't.

It was a chorus of disappointments. Jonah felt cheated of justice.

As Jonah sat on a hill, hoping Ninevah would erupt in a fireball, he benefited from the shade of some kind of fast-growing bush. When the bush died, he felt sorry for it – and for himself, exposed to the burning sun.

The Bible then explains that the bush was a parable, an analogy – if Jonah could feel pity for a mere bush, why shouldn't God feel pity for people who didn't know they were doing wrong?

Did Jonah get the message? Do we?

Demanding justice

Almost every day, when I read my newspapers, I see stories of victims demanding justice. They expect the cop who assaulted them to be fired. They want the thug who robbed them to restore everything, including their peace of mind. They want the rapist locked up for life, the child molester kept under eternal surveillance....

I don't say these things to belittle their experience. But I wonder if people really know what they're saying when they insist that only conviction and sentencing can bring “closure” for their pain.

There is no “closure.” Not even a life for a life – in countries that still practice capital punishment – can restore the life that was lost.

“Jonah would not forgive,” Alan Reynolds concluded. “He wanted God's favour for Israel, but not for Nineveh! He wanted God's grace for himself, but not for others!”

Alan calls the story “a mirror held up to the eyes of the Israelites of the time.” It is, he suggests, a sermon that anticipates, by several centuries, Jesus' theme of “Love your enemies.”

The biblical Jonah couldn't see any justice in mercy. To him, justice meant vengeance.

He has a lot of modern followers.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column had two themes, I suppose – the foolhardiness of pedestrians, and the way our actions reveal our beliefs.

William Ball chose to focus on the pedestrians: "I've long thought and discussed this with my wife and children; many seem to act as if the lines of a crosswalk were like force field barriers (Star Trek) and that the laws of physics doesn't apply to them. There is no contest between flesh and blood which can die (yes, I'll use the word) and metal/plastic/rubber behemoths moving at whatever speed. We get injured even when we are hit by a bicyclist. This doesn't necessarily mean that people believe that they are being 'looked after' by Someone. It could simply mean that they are not paying attention or have unwarranted trust in the people and circumstances (weather, condition of the road) around them. The (thankfully) few times that I've sailed through stop signs have unnerved me as I think what could have happened had someone assumed that I would stop.

"Recent studies on brain development, especially that of teens and young adults, suggest that risk taking is necessary for us to move from childhood to fully functioning adulthood; that we would never have left the trees or the cave otherwise."

Similarly, James West mused, "Once upon a time didn't you believe that you were immortal or at least bullet-proof? No one would learn to ride a bike, drive a motorcycle or automobile, if one didn't have a sense of invincibility. Same goes for signing up to join the armed services or scuba dive, or sky dive, or go swimming and diving. Oh, and then there's marriage and childbirth, too...."

Isobel Gibson picked up on the way actions reveal beliefs, and connected that concept to her business environment: "This makes an interesting parallel to what we're taught (or told anyway) in business school -- to analyze a company's strategy not just by what they say, but also by what they do. I wonder what unexamined beliefs we all hold, implicit in our actions."

Finally, Bob Warrick's letter last week prompted Clare Neufeld to respond: "Bob Warrick makes a good point. I agree that some sensitivity, at certain places/times may be an act of grace. However, there are (or may be) those whose calling in life is similar to that of the ancient 'prophets', whose messages were intended to 'change the status quo, by word, drama, and their life's witness', sometimes subduing blind arrogance or hubris, at others replace bitterness, or fear with courage, hope, faith and the overarching grace of God's love.

"They needed to use mystical words, requiring extra effort from listeners to discern and decipher, and other times to shock their comfort zones by calling a spade a spade.

"So as we encourage one another to continue to embrace the amazing grace, which offers cohesive, healing, directing, forgiving, compassionate and empathic power to 'know the truth' which promises to set us all free from crippling entanglements, we may recognize that some still walk in the dark, while others prefer to reflect the light, even in the darkness."

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is "Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists," by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemlikeGod" page, www.seemlikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
