

Thoughts on Middle Age and Jonah's Lament

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Jonah preached in these words, "Only forty days more and Nineveh is going to be destroyed." And the people of Nineveh believed in God. . . . And God relented. . . . Jonah was very indignant at this; he fell into a rage. He prayed to the Lord and said: "Ah, Lord, is this not just as I said would happen? That was why I went and fled to Tarshish; I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness. (Jon 3)

Of all the prophets, if I remember rightly, Jesus compared himself only with Jonah, who was far and away the crankiest of the lot. I like Jonah more and more as I journey deeper into the tangled thickets of my forties. There is something to be said for my younger years when, immersed in the inner journey of self-discovery, I wrestled with my graces and demons and faced the terrible fear that I couldn't make it through. All that now seems so much simpler. But as you live, you engage in love after love even while your attention seems fixed on your own survival. People enter your heart and stay; your taste for beauty matures; places acquire a personal history and remain sacred from then on. Without noticing, your heart's loves have become a crowd.

When you look around and find that you have made some basic peace with yourself—demons and graces and all—you find that your life has grown full. "Commitments," we call them. By the time he stopped near the winter woods, Robert Frost had learned enough to know he loved to watch snow falling in silent trees. Still, there were those promises to keep. It seems that the more I am at home with my own heart, the more people and places can move me. Even the face of a stranger on the street touches chords that would, I realize, echo and reverberate for hours had I the time and the energy to pay attention.

Last winter, some thirty men and women from our Sunday Mass community made a retreat together. On the first night, we were asked to go aside and find an image of ourselves on a journey. It happened that three of us, middle-aged men all, crafted similar images. One said, "People think of me as a gazelle, but I see myself as a hippopotamus: a fat hippopotamus walking through deep mud, carrying a trunk on its back." The second said, "When I visualized myself it seemed that I was walking, and working hard at it, but that I was not moving. Then I realized that I was balancing a large plank on my shoulders and that other people were standing on the plank. All my energy went into supporting the plank so that they could stand." I said, "I see myself as a horse, not a horse running through the fields, but a horse pulling a wagon. The road lies clear before me, mostly loose sand and large stones, hill after hill. Wooden wheels churn and creaking axles groan. Every now and then someone comes along and tosses something else into the wagon." Three middle-aged men: our congruence comforted me that night.

JOY BRINGS GRIEVING

A wise man told me once that if I lived my life well I would grow into poverty without even trying. The more I loved, the more my heart would outrun my body's energies. I would find myself too poor to respond to all who moved me. Well, I feel it these past few years, a too-muchness about life. Every joy carries its inevitable grieving.

Jonah knew. He ran when God invited him to tackle a whole city. "Bring the challenge and vitality and passion of the Word of God to Nineveh." I run too. Off to Tarshish in whatever boat will carry me, hiding from the passion that is too much to live up to. After plenty of bad behavior, Jonah walks in the

heart of Nineveh after all. He gives voice to God's passion there. And it works! The city hears and people change. Some little hope is born in the heart of a civilization as its king commands all to "set aside the violence you have in hand."

But here, at what should be the celebration, Jonah endears himself to me most of all. Off he walks into his own desert to pout. "I knew it," he says. "I knew you would relent. Too damn much mercy! Small comfort for a harried midlife man who perversely longs to sweep the stage of life clean with one violent swing. Had they not repented and found new hope, at least there would be one city less in my life and maybe a little time to put my feet up watching the smoke of ruin drift away. But no. Now I must find an inner place for the gratitude and affection of a messy city, pulsing with life."

The book says that God caused a little shrub to grow, giving Jonah shade from the sun, and that Jonah loved the shrub instantly. God sent a worm the following day to cause the shrub to wither, leaving Jonah shadeless. Bad behavior again, and Jonah, finally, makes his full lament.

"Are you angry about the shrub?" asks God. "I am angry enough to die!" There is something in me, I find, that longs for a tidy ending to the mess of life

and must confront God for being too merciful, for stirring up hope all over again, for reminding us of our beauty and our promise. Sometimes this violent longing embarrasses me, and I pout over tiny things like shrubs.

How does God answer? "You are angry about a shrub that you did not plant or tend and that died within a day. And should I not grieve over an entire city facing death, with thousands of people who do not even know their right hand from their left, not to mention all the beasts and cattle?"

There the story ends, God's question ringing off into the silence. That same mercy in which I now live, mercy that rescued me from my demons when I hung there, desperate for hope, confronts me with blunt affection. "We are all in this together." And the wonder of it is that, bad behavior and all, God and I can meet. I find myself less and less an isolated individual and more and more woven into the human fabric. Without the loves, no commitments; without the commitments, no lament; without the lament, no shrub; without the shrub and its inevitable passing, no confrontation with God; without the confrontation, no celebration of the terrible mercy.

I have it in mind that Jonah walked back to town smiling.