

Sweet New Year
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB
September 20, 2020

Reading: A retelling of the Book of Jonah by Rev. Joanne Giannino:
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/story/boundless-love-forgiveness>

Sermon:

When I learned about Justice Ginsberg on Friday night, I burst into tears. Then I calmed down, and then when I thought about the hypocrisy of the Senate, I cried again. I remembered this poem from Dr. Bianca Lynne Spriggs, an Affrilacian poet, that was shared by many, including me, after the Cavanaugh confirmation in 2018, so it may be familiar. The poem is titled, "To the woman I saw today who wept in her car."

Woman,
I get it.
We are strangers,
but I know the heart is a hive
and someone has knocked yours
from its high branch in your chest
and it lays cracked and splayed,
spilling honey all over
the ground floor of your gut
and the bees inside
that you've trained
over the days and years
to stay put, swarm
the terrain of your organs,
yes,
right here in traffic,
while we wait for the light to change.

I get it.
How this array of metal and plastic
tends to go womb room
once the door shuts,
and maybe you were singing
only moments before
you got the call,
or remembered that thing
you had tucked back and built
such sturdy scaffolding all around,
and now here it comes to knock
you adrift with only your steering
wheel to hold you up.

Or, maybe today
was just a tough day
and the sunlight
and warm weather
and blossoming limbs
and smiling pedestrians
waiting for their turn to cross
are much too much to take
when you think of all that's left
to do, and here you are,
a reed stuck in the mud
of a rush hour intersection,
with so very many hours left to go.

Woman,
I know you.
I know how that thing
when left unattended
will show up as a typhoon
at your front door
demanding to be let in
or it will take
the whole damn house with it.

I know this place too.
I get it.

But because we are strangers,
because you did not see me see you,
my gaze has no more effect
than a phantom that stares at the living.
And yet, I want you to know that
today, in the hive of my heart,
there is room enough
for you.¹

It feels like things are piling up too high to manage. And yet. We must. RBG died on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and there is a tradition in Judaism that those who live to the last day of the year are the most righteous, needed until the very end and are given the title “tzadik,” righteous and saintly. Rosh Hashanah begins the Days of Awe, 10 days of seeking forgiveness, reconciliation, and reflection, seeking to have one's name written in the Book of Life for another year. The Days of Awe conclude with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, next Monday.

The book of Jonah is part of the Yom Kippur readings and worship, and is also part of the lectionary in Protestant congregations this morning. Jonah is an interesting story in a lot of ways, not only because Jonah gets carried into service by a big fish after running away from a

¹ From Black Mermaid (Argus House Press, 2018)

request from G_d, but also because Jonah so misses the mark on the lesson he is supposed to learn. Jonah tells a community that he has a message from G_d that they need to repent, they do, and then he is mad because G_d doesn't seek vengeance on those folks. And the book of Jonah ends on a question from G_d. As Joanne noted in the retelling we heard earlier, we don't get to know if Jonah comes around, or if he says vengeful, and perhaps afraid. Alicia Suskin Ostriker, poet, English professor and Jewish scholar writes:

[Jonah] would rather die than see the Ninevites unharmed and himself embarrassed after predicting their annihilation. Here is one of the most devastating insights in the entire Bible. When G_d asks him if he is right to be so angry, Jonah does not answer. Does not deign to answer. Cannot. Too sullen to speak, he leaves the city and sits on its east side, making himself a shelter and waiting to see what will happen... He wants it to suffer the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, apparently. Cataclysmic fire, smoke, and ashes are what he waits for...

When we are afraid, we can get focused on the wrong thing and ignore our empathy. Without compassion, it is easier to place importance on reputation and power rather than people. G_d tries to take Jonah by the hand with leading questions, to ignite his empathy, and broaden his understanding of who is deserving of compassion. The book ends with G_d's question: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" That's the end of the book. Ostriker reflects on this:

The silence at the end of the book of Jonah is one of the most remarkable silences in all of literature. In both the Masoretic Torah and the Dead Sea Scrolls a space is left in the text after Jonah's statement that he wants to die. The space indicates that Jonah's shocking utterance must give us pause. Now at the text's final stopping place, the silent space expands to circle the globe. Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city; in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also much cattle? The question hangs in the air. The air is filled with ghosts.²

Reading Jonah, I think about the power of appearance over and above what is just. One of my favorite aspects of the relationship of G_d with the people of Hebrew Scripture, is that G_d changes plans, judgments, and beliefs, based on experience and choices of others. In this way, G_d represents some of the best parts of humanity, our flexibility, ability to learn, grow, and integrate new ideas--to be changed.

The themes in the story of Jonah connect to what has happened in the few days since the death of Justice Ginsberg. RBG led a remarkable life and her work was so important to the country and to generations of women. The political posturing around her death is so full of hypocrisy, lies, lack of compassion, and bad faith, that it is hard to bear. I held out hope that the importance of her legacy might make some kind of difference to those who had made previous promises about how the next vacancy would be approached, but that is out the window. There are those in power who would rather sit on a hill and die than not take an opportunity for more control and power, and to eschew empathy in the face of the opportunity to let something burn.

We were already struggling, and the layers this week of more violence, another hurricane, fires, and the death of RBG is just... too much. I don't know where your feelings are around all this, but let me name out loud some things that we may all need to hear. None of us are alone. We may feel despair, or hopelessness, but we are not alone. Some of us might need to talk about

² Ostriker, Alicia. "Jonah: The Book of the Question." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2005, pp. 278–293. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41402593. Accessed 20 Sept. 2020.

what we are feeling. Some might need to listen. Some of us might need to compartmentalize. Some might need to rest. Some might need to pray, or sing, or demonstrate, or make phone calls, or stand in the sunshine. Each week we are invited into spiritual practices in worship, and are invited into relationship with one another and with the transcendent. We practice together so that when we get hit in the gut with something, we have spiritual tools which help us remember that when we are in despair, we have a web of relationships that hold us.

And we *can* act. We can vote. It is a spiritual and religious act to listen for the still small voice in your heart and vote. Vote your values. Encourage others to do the same. Election Day is November 3. There is still time to check in with your friends and relatives, and be sure they have everything they need to be able to vote. You can make calls, and do lots of things right from home to help others be sure they are ready.

Let's help take care of each other, be gentle with one another. Be a listening ear. And let's smash some patriarchy. It's what RBG would want us to do.

So may it be. Amen and *Shana Tovah*