

BREAKING GROUND

Texts on Sunday, February 3, 2013

Jonah 3: 1-10; Luke 4: 22-30

It's funny about Jonah. So many people make it out to be a fish story. All the talk, all the wonder, all the ridicule drives straight at the ridiculous notion a man in the ocean could really be saved by a whale. Or, to quote rather more famously, *Oh Jonah, he lived in a whale [2x] / For he made his home in / That fish's abdomen . . . but it ain't necessarily so.* The story of Jonah is not about that fish. And the book is so short, so easy to read—just four chapters—that we ought to wonder: Has church focused on the unbelievable word in the book in order to not hear the undesirable word of the book?

The undesirable word is very basic. Jonah, the Jew, does not want to preach repentance and release—Jubilee!—to the hated people of Nineveh; he hates them too much. He does all he can to avoid the divine command, but at length, he arrives in the great city of unbelievers, and begins preaching. He's not very good at it. "Forty days, Nineveh shall be overthrown!" But sometimes, the leaders and their people don't waste time on how bad they think the preacher is. Sometimes, people just believe God, and make the change. That's what the infidel king and all Nineveh do, according to *Jonah*. They believe God and change. The hard word of this book is that sometimes God stops sending the Word to the chosen people. Sometimes God's Word moves like rain over the land. If the chosen people are stiff and hard and sure of their tradition, the Word rolls right off the land and does them no good. If the chosen are frozen, the rain of God moves on until it falls on a people whose ground is warm and soft and ready, whose hearts and ears are open. Yes, says the book of *Jonah*, God loves other people—nations we hate, religions we ridicule—for sometimes, they have their ground plowed, ready for the seed. If we are crusted over with certainty and regulations, possessions and traditions, God moves on.

Some of you have studied the Old Testament with me. You'll remember the key in Genesis 12:3 which opens the whole Bible. God makes three promises to Abraham. You're going to be many *people*. You're going to live in a safe *place*. And you're going to have a great *purpose*, one unlike all other nations', for you shall be my blessing to all nations on earth. Now, those first two promises are not special. They're essential, but they're not special. Every apple tree and squirrel yearns to pass the seed on to many generations. Every polar bear and cactus needs a safe place to dwell. It is utterly ordinary for a people to suppose their God cares about their security across time and space. But it's not ordinary—it's extraordinary—that God

should place upon any people the command to become a blessing to all people of the earth. The whole Bible, Old Testament and New, is a record of two movements around this extraordinary demand. One, how hard the people have kicked against God, trying to toss Promise #3 into the dustbin, so they can stay safe and selfish and ordinary as beavers inside their borders and their profit-margins. Two, how hard God has sent God's Word into the chosen people in every generation, to awaken them to the news that God does not love them or any people for their own sake, but only so that Love might break new ground, and make new hearts ready for holy seed.

Now, I could take you through the whole Bible and place in your hands this wonderful key that can unclasp and set you free—but we're going to let Jesus lead the Bible study today. Last Sunday, we heard the first half of this gospel story of Jesus in the synagogue. In the first half, Jesus proclaimed Jubilee. He told the people that they would immediately be forgiven—and begin forgiving—every debt, deprivation, and bondage. And, right on cue, the congregation clapped. They loved it, and loved him. They were hearing the word everyone loves to hear and preachers and politicians love to speak: *We are the people, and this is the place.* Why, even Riverside loves to hear that word. And "all spoke well of him," Luke's story says of Jesus—so proud were they of their hometown boy. "I'n'that Joseph's boy!"

But before this Sabbath celebration in the synagogue gets to half-time, that so-happy congregation gets so hot with sudden rage they drive him out of town and try to kill him. An emotional grenade explodes inside them. What pulled the pin? It's the very thing we've been talking about. Jesus tells them that the Word alive in him isn't going to work among them. It's going to be a dud, because they are too sure that they already have God's word. *The truth is, he says, Elijah's ministries were needed in Israel, but God sent Elijah up to save a widow in the land of Sidon. Elishah's powers to heal lepers were needed in Israel, but God sent Elishah to save Syria's commander of armies. Syria? Are you serious! It's in the book.* In other words, God loves other people. If you are crusted over with certainty and regulations and tradition, God's word moves on. In the synagogue story, that does it; now they want to kill Jesus. In the end, they'll have their way. In every age, we get our way. We kill God's word to keep it for ourselves. But God's healing word does not tarry for tradition or submit to execution. God's word goes where ears are open, where ground is broken. Those who are sure that their tradition holds the key to the storehouse of God are left with their keys and their empty storehouse. But God moves on.

Now, predictably and tragically, Christians have very often kept the true key from turning their own locked hearts. They've made the easy move.

They say, *This story is not about us. Jesus was charging Jews with the error of not receiving him, but we Christians have received God's Word. Woe to them who reject him.* There is a great gulf between them who think that and those who confess that God's word is free to move on in whomever God chooses. You decide. Which side are you on? Between them who are sure their way in love and worship is the true way and those who wonder where God is moving now, who pray to know how God is still trying, even now, to break open our own ground so holy seed might fall in deep and rise to life anew, there are two religions, not one. It has nothing to do with Judaism or Christianity or any -ism. It has to do with spirit and with truth.



See how this has played out in American history. Is there any question, really, that in America, black history, along with the histories of all the peoples of color, is braided with a white history nailed to the plank of white supremacy by irons fashioned from this Christian delusion of God-possession? Is there any doubt that this delusion so hardened the hearts of the white nation, freezing the ground of love and power, that God just moved on? How better to explain 400 years of unrelenting oppression of all persons of color—or, more lately, of some persons of color, often the poorest—than to propose that where God finds a people so sure of their possessions and their privileges, God just moves on to break new ground; that God walks with the oppressed, and has no part in the people in power or in their oppression, no matter how loud their prayers, how sweet their songs; or that evil so long enduring cannot be explained by God, but only by the absolute absence of God from evil in all its moving parts?

Here is a word of caution, though. Can the hearts of an oppressed people so harden in hatred that their ground also becomes a frozen ground, and the rain of God moves on? James Baldwin answered Yes. In *Notes of Native Son*, he describes the peculiar rigidity of hatred manifested in his father's bizarre physical posture; and how father and son never spoke; and how the family buried the father on the day Baldwin's mother gave birth to that father's last child; and how Harlem had exploded in a devastating riot the night before, in August 1943. Young James Baldwin, not yet twenty, reluctantly went to the side of the coffin. There, he writes, he saw that

It was necessary to hold on to things that mattered. The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter. To believe that they did was to acquiesce in one's own destruction. Hatred, which destroyed so much, never failed to destroy the [one] who hated, and this was an immutable law.

Is that the sound of God's word moving on and falling in open ground?

In 1943, Riverside Church was a fairly new church. Its reputation was already fast, of course. Nevertheless, as I have learned from some of you, how hard was the ground in this white stoned temple, when black women and men came to worship. Now, many years have passed and the challenges for the church and nation take very different forms today. But the Word of God still hovers in a cloud over this church, as over all the churches. When the good rain falls, will it penetrate and nourish and give new life, or will it roll off the ground hardened by power and fear, by traditions and regulations, and will God's rain just move on?

You hold the answer. It lies in your hearts and your hands, whether power and fear will be released, and love fall down on this ground as the sweet rain of God. It is the essence of a living faith that those who have it use it to do a great thing, which fearful people cannot dare to do. But that great thing you must do together, really together, else there is no people, and no ground, and no rain, and God moves on.

Over sixty years ago, Baldwin penned the last words of that volume we read from a moment ago: "It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. The world is white no longer and it will never be white again." (*Notes of a Native Son*, p. 149) Therefore, "let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." (Heb 12.1) May our ground be fresh plowed and lie broken before the heavens, that we may become a blessing to all the peoples in this great city.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*