

August 2, 2020
Twentieth Sunday of Online Worship

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

Hiding in the Water

Jonah 1: 1-17; 2: 1-3; 10
Psalm 17: 1-7, 15

“Revelation” is the third way by which God interacts with us in Biblical history. Remember we are “wading in the water” in this six-week preaching series and we have identified three aspects in which God interacts with us using water: creation, redemption and revelation. Water is the essential and basic element of creation and to the sustaining of life itself. Redemption is God’s using of water for rescue and salvation. You’ve heard Jacob and Elizabeth and me speak about these for the last few Sundays. Revelation occurs when God reveals God’s presence, blessing, and opportunity, and it transforms us in both simple ways (most of our God-sightings and revelations are like that), or in big ways that change lives and society. This morning we will look at a couple of examples of God’s interacting with particular individuals using creativity, redemption and revelation: one in the Old Testament and another here in our own country and time.



Jonah and the Whale by Albert Pinkham Ryder

Sometimes, despite our most sincere faithfulness and reliance upon God, we go underwater and feel like we are drowning. Some of us—maybe most of us—might say that we often feel like that these days. This pandemic has taught us at least two things: No matter how expertly or confidently we strategize and put in place what we consider to be a secure life for ourselves, we simply cannot ever be 100% sure. Or, as my Hungarian grandmother would frequently warn, “You never know, honey.”

She was right. Life is unpredictable. Even as people of faith we are not exempt from overwhelming surprises...like the unseen waves, currents, or rip tides that can slam us to the bottom of the ocean floor when we get caught in them, as we considered a couple weeks ago when we looked at surfing as “walking on water.” However, as people of faith, we know that we can and must turn to God to help us. “*The Lord’s people, in the time of their trouble, know where to go for comfort and relief.*”

This takes us to today’s lectionary, David’s Psalm, chapter 17, wherein he confidently says, “*I have called upon you, for you will hear me, O God.*” The implications suggest a past history for the psalmist of God’s having been there for him, having had his back when he was distraught by some circumstance. That experience of distress had taught him to rely upon his God no matter what. And, so the second thing we may be actively learning from this pandemic (the first one being that we cannot control the future even with the best laid plans) is that God is with us even in this mess...and that God is already going about the work of redemption even if we can’t see it.

Listen to David's words:

*Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from the lips free of deceit.
From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right.*

*If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.
As for what others do, by the word of your lips
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped.*

*I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O savior of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.*

...
*As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.*

This psalm, today's lectionary, reveals David's own confidence in the presence and intervention of God in his personal history. But he's not the only one in the Bible to turn to God for comfort.. it doesn't just stop with David. Scroll forward to the gospel of Matthew where we see Jesus , having received the news of John the Baptist's death and beheading, going straight to God seeking time away from the demands of life in order to have time with God who would comfort him. It did not turn out so well for Jesus...this time of privacy and prayer that he sought... because so many people needed him and clamored for his attention. Nevertheless, God was his first recourse for consolation and guidance. So it should be for us as well.

The Jonah text is not lectionary, but I like it for this message because it reveals Jonah's character to be not unlike that of the psalmist and Jesus. And, I think we may easily identify with his story. You may recall surfing lesson #2 from a couple weeks ago. After "know the water you are in" as best you can, you then must discover and know why you are there. What's God's plan? Well, Jonah knew all of those things (God wanted him to preach to Ninevah) and did not want to go. So he tried to run away. He tried to get as far from God as he thought he could. He tried to hide.

I had a wonderful Irish Setter named Armistead...110 pounds. If he didn't want to come when he was called, he would run to the back bedroom and put his head under the bedskirt. He believed he was hiding. Four-fifths of his body was still visible but he didn't seem to realize that.

Jonah, distressed as he was about his call, hid out at sea...or tried to...and obviously God still saw him. And you know the story from there. What I'm interested in is the similarities between the psalmist, David, and Jonah as they react to finding themselves in distress. Whether on land or in the sea, unpredictable circumstances will find us. But so will God.

This should be a comfort to us. The fact that God can find us and be with us wherever we are should not be a surprise to us. The staff of Woods often engages in sharing our God-sightings...places or situation where we have seen God's activity or blessing happening. We did this during our Stewardship Grace Note season, sharing stories by email with all of you online if you recall, as the congregation identified the presence of God's grace in our ministries.

God reveals all kinds of things to us on a regular basis. Someone was speaking about her delight over something nearly miraculous that she had witnessed during the week. "Isn't God just awesome to have done this incredible thing?" she exclaimed to her friend. "Actually not all that amazing," replied her friend. "It's just like God to do something like that." It is the same irony in the psalmist's use of the phrase "*marvelous lovingkindness*" in our text this morning to describe God's actions. Marvelous may describe a characteristic of God, but lovingkindness is a normal and expected attribute of God. God's persistent offering of blessings that delight us are at one and the same time marvelous and incredible AND typical and normal behavior for God. They happen in ordinary ways often.

God sees us in all those ordinary events of our lives such that at any of those events...at any moment...God may intervene and reveal something life-changing or just something simple to us that reminds us of God's presence and transforms everything. Each time, if we let it in, each intervention is a revelation. It certainly happened to Jonah as he came to realize his call to Ninevah and the transformation it had for his life. At first he's defiant and flees in the opposite direction on the boat; but then, even though he's reluctant, he obediently goes on to Ninevah.

Darin Atwater, the founder and conductor of the Soulful Symphony in 2000, is the second example of a transformed life with huge impact that goes well beyond this individual. Soulful Symphony was born of just such a simple revelation as we have been speaking. The Soulful Symphony is the only all black and Latino symphony in the country...and is currently the symphony in residence at the Merriweather Pavilion. Some of you may have heard them perform at the Meyerhoff in Baltimore or watched the performances on PBS. Darin brought some of the jazz musicians here to Woods in 2009 to highlight our Wake up World project raising funds for suicide prevention and hurricane Katrina relief. I got permission from Darin to share his story because it is particularly relevant for us here at Woods, which I'll explain in a moment.

When Darin was younger, it was clear he had a gift for music. He was talented and creative, playing piano at home and in church. Somewhere in that time frame he heard a symphony orchestra for the first time and, in his words, "My world went from black and white to technicolor." Symphony orchestras are essentially a Western civilization cultural experience...European actually. Usually symphonies are attended and we hear Brahms and Beethoven and Bach, etc. In reality, as Darin shares it, such music is not the heart of America.

Blues and jazz and rock and roll were birthed on American soil. And spirituals, like the one you will hear sung in a moment, “Wading in the Water,”... were formative in that music. They came out of the American history of slavery. Racial injustice goes back a long way as you know, and has always included a longing to escape and a determination to find freedom. Old and New Testaments often reference the Israelites’ quest for freedom in their escape from slavery in Egypt. In terms of slavery in America, Darin Atwater explains the origins of “Wading in the Water,” a spiritual familiar to us all. Slaves were not allowed to use instruments and so the acapella voice was the instrument of spirituals and birthed the music of American soul: jazz, the blues, and rock and roll.

“Wading in the Water” as a spiritual served as a means of communication to fugitive slaves to avoid capture by hiding in the water where dogs that were being used by slave owners would lose the trail. “Wading in the Water” was first published in 1901 and associated with songs of the Underground Railroad. A single voice, then, could offer consolation as well as save lives in these spirituals.

Darin Atwater’s revelation came as he imagined what the power of a single sound or voice might be if it was merged with the sounds and voices of many...the creative use of a single voice, the redemption of unjust circumstances that foster a need to hide, and then the revelation of movement toward freedom...what if these ultimately combine with the sounds and voices of others...

Darin’s revelation is particularly relevant for us at Woods as our Session has just adopted its Call to Action for Dismantling Racism. As Jacob preached last week, we *are* living in very troubled times where the water is being distressed, particularly concerning racial injustice, and we are being compelled to tend to it. Jacob said it last week using the gospel of John wherein the angel went down to the pool and “*troubled the water*” so that “*whosoever stepped into the troubled water would be made whole.*” As always, and it is one of the reasons being a part of this church is so vital...Woods is jumping right into the troubled waters of racial injustice and seeking to bring about healing and wholeness.

2020 Call To Action For Dismantling Racism

Racism in all forms, including systemic, institutional, and interpersonal, must be addressed and overcome. Woods Church condemns the constrained lives and deaths of all people that have resulted from racism and we reject the hate and violence that racism generates. In particular, we understand and recognize the value, worth, quality, and significance of Black lives and stand in solidarity with our Black sisters and brothers. We are committed to acting upon this historic opportunity to root out racism for all members of our society.

We must recognize the evil of racism and bear witness, in the name of Jesus Christ, wherever we see or hear it. Woods Church is committed to creating a safe, just, and anti-racist society for all people. In examining ourselves in light of recent events, we acknowledge a need to go beyond our previous actions with respect to inequality and

racism and work harder to make a better future. Our first step will be to examine our church ministries, offices, pastoral care, and education spaces.

We must expunge hate and violence when and where we witness it. We have to overcome the unacceptable levels of poverty and inequity in our nation and communities. We have to ensure that no parent has to worry about their child's safety because of the color of their skin. We must address the underlying causes that foster this inequity.

We recognize that Woods Church cannot do this overnight or alone. We commit to working with our faith and community partners to leverage our strengths, voices, and actions to co-create a better world for everyone.

The Session has made a commitment to Dismantling Racism and tasking the ministries at Woods to focus on this process. It has made a commitment to combining our voice with the voices of others. You are already participating in the 21 Day Challenge and we will be actively involved in much more in the months and years ahead. Your voices count.

The waters around us today, in 2020, are greatly troubled. And we can focus on these troubled waters as being the result of horrific choices made by men and women over time, and hide from the consequences. We may complacently condemn others whose racism overwhelmed their humanity and/or Christian values. Or...we can look deeply into these troubled waters and see that same angel of whom John speaks using the hand of God to stir the pot of redemption.

I'm hoping that we choose this latter perspective. I believe that is what we have done in our Call to Action in Dismantling Racism, believing that God is going to somehow heal even this and make us whole. It means we must look for God's revelations...personal and communal...that we must believe in those God-sightings that we bear witness to as assurances of God's presence with us even in...maybe especially in...these troubled waters, because it is just like God to do that.

I believe that we each can discover some creative aspect of ourselves as Jonah and Darin did...and commit our lives to God's act of redemption, bringing wholeness out of brokenness. That God's revelation to each one of us will show us how to combine our single voices into one voice that transforms lives and society in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The addition of a symphony to spirituals is redemption at work. Not that it made the freedom songs better by any means...there is nothing better than God's inspired acapella song of freedom. But the use of the symphony and its accompanying culture brought together the Black Spirituals and their accompanying culture...and God saw that it was and is good.

VIDEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf4X74zeRO8>