

Sermon Title: The Courage to Live Every Day As If It Is Our Last Day

Preacher: Rabbi Peter Berg – Senior Rabbi of The Temple

Bible Passage: The Book of Jonah

Date: Sunday, March 19, 2023

Scripture: Rabbi Berg gave a recap of the Story of Jonah.

God told Jonah to go to the great but evil city of Nineveh. Jonah is commanded to tell Nineveh to “shape up or ship out.” Jonah responds by fleeing in fear. He boards a ship headed as far away as he could go. Along the way God stirs up a great storm. The ship’s sailors blame the storm on the presence of Jonah and they throw him overboard where a great fish swallows him.

Jonah’s story is about a man running away in fear from the call of God.

Sermon Notes:

Rabbi Berg raised a question for us to consider: What was Jonah so afraid of; what was Jonah’s problem? Maybe it was the same fear we experience when God calls us to action and obedience in our exhausting and overwhelming world. There is so much need and we, like the prophets in the Bible, cannot possibly meet the demands of what God asks us to do. We are, like Jonah, called to be God’s persons and do God’s will in a complex, exhausting and overwhelming world. We are called to be God’s people under conditions such as apathy, substance abuse, isolation, trauma, etc. – compassion fatigue.

We are even overwhelmed by a world of terror and the lack of truth all around us and even blatant dishonesty. Fake news, real news, there’s a name for it – Post Truth. We live in a Post Truth era. The Oxford dictionary designated Post Truth as the most significant new phrase of the decade. People now believe stories that are based on not even a little bit of fact. They are based on what they want to believe and that is very dangerous. Our world is riddled with deception and yet it’s beyond overwhelming. And yet God calls us to do God’s work in that kind of world and to do God’s work. No wonder Jonah wanted to make the world go away.

There was a story about a philosophical clock that began to think about its future. It was placed on a shelf for the first time. It began to think it had to tick twice each second, 120 times each minute, 7,200 times an hour and 172,800 times a day. This amounted to 63 million ticks a year and in ten years 630 million ticks. The clock became overwrought, so overcome by fear at the thought of what lay ahead that it collapsed from nervous exhaustion. This is also Jonah’s story and our story; too many of us are overcome by fear of what lies ahead, sometimes so much so that we find it difficult to move forward. Maybe Jonah is overwhelmed by the fear of fatigue, the fear of being given one more task in an overwhelming world.

Or is it possible Jonah was afraid of going to an “other” kind of place, an unknown or unfamiliar experience with “other” people. This kind of fear leads to the belief that “others” are my enemy. This world is brimming with intolerance. Rabbi Berg went on to suggest there are three causes for intolerance:

1. Insecurity/hidden fear over major and/or minor possibilities
2. False sense of pride, misplaced pride in our own cultures
3. Perceived injustices (the feeling that we ourselves have been victimized)

Rabbi Berge cautioned us against a “serene faith in our own righteousness”. It will result in destruction and terrorism. He suggested there is value in being wrong: as soon as we discover we are wrong, we are not wrong anymore. It leads to discovery and insight. We can find common ground if we ask questions looking for understanding rather than looking for answers.

We cannot afford to be afraid to go to the “other” the way Jonah was. Is it possible that Jonah and we are afraid that God is more merciful, more generous, and more forgiving than we are? This would shame Jonah. This would shame us. It would mean that we stand naked before God in need of mercy and forgiveness too.

In Jewish tradition there is this prayer seeking forgiveness: “...for the sin that we (all of us) have committed against you God by deceiving ourselves consciously or unconsciously.” Our first priority must be to get to know who we are so that we can stop deceiving ourselves and to understand God is compassionate enough and forgiving enough to love us and “others” of our world. When we know ourselves we become free, victorious trusting in the mercy of God.

Finally, about that clock that was overwhelmed by fear of its own future. The clock was repaired by a watchmaker and it began to tick again. The clock then began to realize that in order to function efficiently, all it had to do was to tick one tick at a time and it worked perfectly for 137 years!

The clock reminds us that when we are afraid and exhausted, we need to remember God’s mercy is INEXHAUSTIBLE. Let us remember that God has made us all neighbors and called us to reconciliation. Let us remember God is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. As far as the east is from the west so far God removes transgression from us.

Let us have the courage to face this Church Anniversary as a gift from God. A church anniversary gives us a new start. We are no longer prisoners of our past but architects of our future. We can walk out of this church a new people with the new life that God has given us.

Sermon Points:

1. Fear obstructs God’s call on our lives
2. God’s inexhaustible mercy frees us to do God’s will
3. We are architects of the future God has given us

Discussion Questions

1. Ebenezer is the Freedom Church. How does the story of Jonah apply to issues of justice and freedom?
2. Describe a time when you were afraid to do what God commanded you to do. Did you do it anyway? What was the result?
3. What did you learn about yourself from this message about Jonah? What will you change as a result of what you learned?
4. What did you learn about God from the sermon?
5. What do you think is required to trust the mercy of God?
6. What is the difference between asking questions for understanding rather than for answers?