

Jonah and US...What does Jonah mean to me in September 2020.

What is asked of Jonah? What is asked of us, of me?

“Rise up, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim against it that its evil has come up to me”.

Is that too much to ask of a prophet.

To speak. Maybe to get in some trouble. Some good trouble.

It is all around me too. From Covid-19 over 200,000 people have died in our nation alone, many from indifference; our climate crisis worsens--fires blaze, seas rise, storms worsen, our immigration policy is broken, children are in cages. China detains a million muslims. Our racial divide needs reckoning.

Using his wealth, his comfort, Jonah secures passage, not to the east, but to the west. Jonah uses his privilege to go the other way. Can you blame him? Can you blame us. We too are weary. We too hide behind our comfort, our homes, our savings, our privilege. We don't have to go anywhere. We can do little or nothing by staying silently right here.

It does not work for Jonah; and it should not work for us. Jonah hears from God again:

“Rise up, and go to Nineveh, the great city, and declare to it the message I am giving you.”

Now Jonah goes. But his voice is weak, and short and delivered without passion:

“Forty more days and Nineveh is overthrown”.

Such a simple request. You don't need an army, a movement, a march. Jonah your voice can be enough...Even a small voice, of a single person, can have great significance. It can have great power.

Justice Ginsburg changed the course of history with her voice. With her pen.

Jonah seems a reluctant voice. He reaches Nineveh...”Forty more days and Nineveh is overthrown”.

But even this insignificant voice, this cry for self-examination, carries great power. The word reaches the king who proclaims that all Ninivites shall “forsake their evil ways, the violence their hands have done.”

...You need to speak, Richard...

When I was a young lawyer, a very young lawyer, I had a special client. Ramona Bowden. When Ramona was a little girl, her father took a whiskey bottle and smashed it on her head. She suffered cognitive damage, and when she got a little older she was admitted to the Augusta Mental Health Institute, wrongly felt to be mentally ill. And there she stayed for 30 plus years until deinstitutionalization released her into the community. And to me. I think through Ramona's troubles and travails, I learned all about the social safety net:

Mainecare, medicare, general assistance, food stamps, the food bank, SSI, issues of access, that one could be charged criminally with trespass in the Augusta police station, indignity.

One day, as Ramona left my office, she looked at me and said, you know Richard, "they treat me like I'm a *"N-word"*.

I said nothing. Why? Was Romana not worth it? Did I not have the energy? Was I just Jonah going the wrong way?

That was 40 years ago...but the memory lingers...

Three weeks ago my neighbor at my camp in Readfield stopped to talk. He was up from Texas with his son who suffers with severe autism. Bruce is a lovely man. This day, he decides to delve into politics, and in due order, discloses that he is afraid of the riots. A racist trope?

I let it go. I say nothing. I go on a canoe ride. Linda and I discuss our silence, our choice not to confront Bruce or to engage him. But I am haunted, like 40 years before. I am Jonah without God's insistence.

My daughter Rachel writes:

"I see a lot of white folks dragging the justice system and galvanizing friends to vote for change. Both necessary. But where we white people seem to be relentlessly letting down Black women is in changing our own behavior, calling out white harm when we witness it and restructuring our own lives.

Here are the questions I ask myself daily:

How can I be braver for Black women?

How can I put my own safety and my own privilege on the line so that Black women are more protected... More respected... More supported? How are we holding space for Black voices? How are we creating safe places for Black women?

I of course do not have all the answers, but I know it is urgent, it is necessary and I know this...It will look like talking less when we want to, and speaking up more when we are scared...."

It is good that we can learn from our children.

I am struggling with the ideas of two books. Professor Michael Sandel's, *The Tyranny of Merit, What's Become of the Common Good*, questions this country's embrace of merit, a concept that secular Jewish culture too has embraced. Besides noting the hypocrisy of our embrace, that we "inhale too greatly in our success", that we suffer from "meritocratic hubris", he posits that this meritocratic embrace diminishes life for many:

"Focusing only, or mainly, on rising does little to cultivate the social bonds and civic attachments that democracy requires. Even a society more successful than ours at providing upward mobility would need to find ways to enable those who do not rise to flourish in place...Our failure to do so makes life hard for those who lack meritocratic credentials..."

But I worry that these people too often thwart the arc of history bending toward justice.

Regardless of the merit of Professor Sandel's conclusions, I am drawn to the compelling message/truth of Isabel Wilkerson's book *Caste, the Origins of our Discontents*. She argues convincingly that we in western culture and particularly in this country live in a caste system, a rigid hierarchy of human rankings. We live under the stigma of such, under its yoke.

We come back to Jonah's voice. To our voice. Ms. Wilkerson's prologue, which I would like to read, shakes me. Ms. Wilkerson, and Jonah, teach me the power that an individual's voice can have. We cannot run away, we should not run away. We must stay, not run the wrong way, and we must speak. Isabel Wilkerson writes:

The Man in the Crowd

"There is a famous black-and-white- photograph from the era of the Third Reich. It is a picture taken in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936, of shipyard workers, a hundred or more, facing the same direction in the light of the sun. They are heiling in unison, their right arms rigid in outstretched allegiance to the Fuhrer.

If you look closely, you can see a man in the upper right who is different from the others. His face is gentle but unyielding. Modern-day displays of the photograph will often add a helpful red circle around the man or an arrow pointing to him. He is surrounded by fellow citizens caught under the spell of the Nazis. He keeps his arms folded to his chest, as the stiff palms of the others hover just inches from him. He alone is refusing to salute. He is the one man standing against the tide.

Looking back from our vantage point, he is the only person in the entire scene who is on the right side of history. Everyone around him is tragically fatefully, categorically, wrong. In that moment, only he could see it.

His name is believed to have been August Landmesser. At the time, he could not have known the murderous path the hysteria around him would lead to. But he had already seen enough to reject it.

He had joined the Nazi Party himself years before. By now though, he knew firsthand that the Nazis were feeding Germans lies about Jews, the outcastes of his era, that, even this early in the Reich, the Nazis had caused terror, heartache, and disruption...

...Though Aryan himself, his openness to the humanity of the people who had been deemed beneath him gave him a stake in their well-being, their fates tied to his. He could see what his countrymen chose not to see.

In a totalitarian regime such as that of the Third Reich, it was an act of bravery to stand firm against an ocean. We would all want to believe that we would have been him. We might feel certain that, were we Aryan citizens under the Third Reich, we surely would have seen through it, would have risen above it like him, been that person resisting authoritarianism and brutality in the face of mass hysteria.

We would like to believe that we would have taken the more difficult path of standing up against injustice in defense of the outcaste. But unless people are willing to transcend their fears, endure discomfort and derision, suffer the scorn of loved ones and neighbors and co-workers and friends, fall into disfavor of perhaps everyone they know, face exclusion and even banishment, it would be numerically impossible, humanly impossible, for everyone to be that man. What would it take to be him in any era? What would it take to be him now?" (Italics in original)

This is what Jonah means to me in September, 2020.