

January 29, 2006  
Jonah 3:1-10, Mark 1:21-28  
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### "Divine Currents in the Universal Stream"

When he was growing up, our son William's favorite book was "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." It is a science fiction fantasy written from the point of view of Arthur Dent, who gets dragged along through the galaxy with Ford Prefect, an alien stranded on earth. In the novel, a super-intelligent alien race constructs a giant computer to discover the ultimate answer to the question of life. After seven and one half million years of calculating, the giant computer gives the answer: forty-two. One of the characters exclaims:

*"Forty-two...Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?"  
"I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."*

According to the story, the earth is constructed to seek the question to the ultimate answer of the meaning of life.

The question about the meaning of life, which the novel approaches with lighthearted humor, presses in upon us in countless ways as we go about our daily lives. We want to spend our limited time and resources on the things that matter. We wonder what forces drive this vast universe. We want to know how God is active in the human affairs and in the world of nature. Most importantly, we want to align our lives with the deep purposes of God. Obviously, there is much that will always remain a mystery to our limited understanding. Yet, there are some things we can know. The Bible helps us see and understand what God is doing in the universe. The stories of faith give us deep insight into the ways in which God moves among us. The Scriptures help us know the ultimate goal of God's plan for creation. Faith enables us to discern what I call the divine currents in the universal stream of life.

The story of God's call to Jonah and the early ministry of Jesus give us a vivid picture of what God is doing in the world. As we heard last week, God calls Jonah to go the Assyrian city of Nineveh to call the people to repent of their evil ways. Jonah runs from the call. He cannot accept the fact that God would send him, a faithful Jew, to a foreign city filled with pagan people. He cannot see why God would have anything to do with unclean gentiles. Why would God be merciful to such undeserving people? He cannot discern the movement of God in human affairs. Because he cannot accept the truth that God acts among the faithless enemies of Israel to heal, to forgive and to save, he cannot join with the movement of God in the world. Jonah runs away. He boards a ship headed for the distant port of Tarshish. As we heard last week, God sends a terrible wind so that the ocean waves beat upon the ship. When Jonah is thrown into the ocean, he finds himself swimming against the currents of God's purposes in the world.

When I was a child, our family's main recreational activity was sailing. Before we sailed on a larger boat, we learned to sail on small one-person boats. We learned to sail on fresh water lakes which had virtually no current or tide. One time, our family went to Savannah to sail in a race on a tidal creek. My inexperience sailing in tidal water with strong currents made it virtually impossible for me to calculate how to tack around a marker in the middle of the stream. Every time I thought I had gone far enough upstream of the marker to come about and round the marker, I would find myself missing the mark. I tried again and again. I did not understand why the boat kept getting swept so far downstream from the marker. Finally, I ended up hitting the marker and being disqualified. There was something going on beneath the surface of the water that I could not see.

There is something going on that Jonah refuses to see. He refuses to see what God is doing until he comes to his senses in the belly of a giant fish. He prays to God to deliver him. The fish spits him out upon the dry land. Once again, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh to call the city to repentance. God also begins the process of delivering Jonah from his resistance to what God is doing in the world. Jonah is God's reluctant prophet. Jonah doesn't want any part of what God is doing.

Yet, Jonah obeys in spite of himself. Jonah goes to Nineveh and walks through the vast city proclaiming the word of God. Everyone, from ordinary citizen to the king, hears the word of God and they repent of their evil ways. When God sees the transformation in the lives of the people, God changes the divine plans for Nineveh. The people bound for destruction find life. God acts in the world to heal, to forgive and to save. The divine current of God's healing grace that runs through life is revealed.

When Jesus bursts upon the scene in the gospel of Mark, he reveals himself as one who calls people to repentance and faith. He embodies in his own person and in his ministry this healing, forgiving, saving power of God. He is the divine current of God's healing grace in the universal flow of life. In the very first miracle story in Mark's gospel, Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and heals a man possessed with an unclean spirit. It is no accident that the healing happens on the Sabbath when such work was not ordinarily done. It is no accident that the healing takes place in the synagogue where God's word is heard and understood. It is no accident that the people recognize God's power and authority in Jesus.

This healing is a kind of visual parable of the movement of God in the world. The healing of the possessed man is the evidence that points to Jesus as the one who has the divine authority to heal, forgive and save.

The demons know exactly who they are up against. They recognize Jesus as the Son of God. They have been fighting against God's healing, forgiving and saving power. In this encounter, we see the currents of divine love driving out the brokenness in this man's life. The people see that his spiritual authority is genuine. They see Jesus as the divine current of healing grace that flows through the world around them.

With all of the forces that press upon our lives, it is hard to know which force will be the strongest. The force of God's amazing love in Jesus Christ is the most powerful current of

all. This divine current leads all things to God. As it says in the first chapter of Colossians, Jesus "is the image of the invisible God...he is before all things and in him all things hold together." No matter how conflicted, troubled and chaotic things may appear, Jesus is at the center of creation, drawing all things to God. When we know where this divine current leads, then we learn to move with the force of God's movement in world. God is always acting to forgive, heal and save the creation. It takes Jonah a lot of pain and anguish to discern that the word of God will accomplish what God sends the word to do. As we will see next week, even when Jonah allows himself to be used by God for a holy purpose, Jonah still cannot grasp the depth and breadth of God's redemptive love. The disciples, who immediately catch sight of what God is doing in Jesus Christ, follow him gladly and without hesitation. Their time of doubt and uncertainty about the strength and direction of the divine current in the universal flow will come later. In the garden of Gethsemane and at the crucifixion, they will run and hide in disbelief that the flow of God's love must pass through the deep waters of suffering and death before it arrives at life again. Still, the current of God's redemptive purposes flows on. When we discern this divine current, we learn to give ourselves to it as we move toward the fulfillment of God's plans for this universe.

Last week, I shared with you the story of Timothy Tyson, the son of a Methodist minister in North Carolina. When he was a young boy, his father served a church in the town of Oxford. During the late sixties and early seventies, when Tim was a young boy, his father took courageous, but unpopular stands for civil rights. I told you about the brutal murder in 1970 of Henry Marrow, a young African-American Vietnam veteran, by a white man and his two grown sons. I told you of the injustice done in the trial when an all-white jury declared the men innocent in spite of the clear evidence of their guilt. I told you how Timothy's life began to spiral down when the family moved to Wilmington.

He became alienated from his family, school and society and involved in the subculture of drugs and alcohol. I told you how he left home at the age of sixteen to live in a commune way out in the country with a couple of friends. I told you how his father found him, blessed him and gave him the family Bible. His father knew that if he were ever to have his son back, he had to let him go. Like Jonah, Timothy could not discern the divine flow of healing love in all the currents of violence, hypocrisy and hatred that swirled in the society about him and in his own heart. His life continued to deteriorate into a haze of drugs and alcohol until he almost killed himself with a deadly combination of the two. Timothy found himself "in the belly of the whale."

He followed the advice of a singer who said, "If, in moving through your life, you find yourself lost...go back to the last place where you knew who you were and what you were doing, and start from there." He found himself at the grave of Henry Marrow and then in the barber's chair of Marrow's murderer, Robert Teal. He knew in his heart that God had called him to write about that troubled time, so that people would not forget or simply hide the deep wounds of the town. He wrote *Blood Done Sign My Name*, the book that tells this story of violence and redemption.

He knew that remembering Henry Marrow's blood, like the blood of Jesus, has the power to redeem history and restore life. He knew that God didn't call him to be a teacher like

his mother or a preacher like his father. He knew that God called him to be a writer of history and to tell the story of Henry Marrow, so that, in confessing and remembering, the people might be healed of the terrible legacy of hatred and violence.

Whenever we feel lost and do not remember who we are, we come back to the source of life. We come back to God in worship. We hear the stories of Scripture that tell us of this amazing God who does not give up on a sinful, broken and rebellious world. Here we meet the God who acts to redeem the world and to restore the creation. Here we meet and are drawn forward by the divine currents of forgiveness, healing and salvation that flow through the heart of all things and lead the creation ever closer to its destiny in God.