



# Yale Divinity School



## CONVOCATION 2004

### Harry and Manette, All Hail!

The contributions of Harry Baker Adams, the Horace Bushnell Professor Emeritus of Christian Nurture, and his wife, Manette, were celebrated during Convocation ceremonies outside Marquand Chapel on a bright, sunny, but windswept afternoon. A section of the Quadrangle on the north side of the Chapel near Beecher House was dedicated in their honor, and a special poem for the occasion from University President Richard C. Levin was read (printed below).



Despite his "retirement" more than four years ago, Professor Adams has continued to be a generous and active member of the YDS community—as demonstrated when he accepted Levin's call to be acting dean of the Divinity School after Richard Wood stepped down at the end of 2000. At that time, Levin called Adams "one of the jewels of the University, always willing to assume major responsibility without hesitation." Adams remains active with the University's United Way campaign and the Connecticut Food Bank; serves on the boards of the Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty and the Grove Street Cemetery ; and is Chair of the Board of Incorporators of the Elizabethan Club. Manette Adams works with several students through Literacy Volunteers and serves on the board of the Yale University Women's Organization. Both are active in the United Church on the Green, where Harry is a member of the Board of

Stewards.

A graduate of Yale College in 1947 and YDS in 1951, Adams began working at the University in 1956 as associate director of field work at the Divinity School. He joined the YDS faculty in 1960 and was named professor of pastoral theology in 1976. The University's chaplain from 1986 to 1991, he was master of Trumbull College for 10 years, served one year as acting master of Saybrook College, and was acting director of the Institute of Sacred Music on three occasions. He served for many years as an associate dean of the Divinity School.




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### **Lines for Harry and Manette In Honor of Their Celebration And in Thanks for All they Have Given**

From Richard C. Levin  
(Written by Penny Laurens)  
October 12, 2004

Cheer Harry and his bride Manette!  
A gracious and caring duet.  
In all Yale has asked  
They've both multi-tasked  
We owe them a towering debt.

At the Div. School in this lovely quad,  
 They honor where Harry has trod.  
 He's been a peacemaker  
 A Giver, not Taker,  
 (And it's proven he's patient as God!).

His stewardship's not commonplace,  
 He preached at Battell with great grace,  
 Both mastered at Trumbull  
 With never a stumble  
 And took Saybrook in their embrace.

Wherever we've been in a clench,  
 When we've had to redo or retrench,  
 When we've been in despair  
 We've called for this pair  
 Heavens knows, now they merit this bench!

May many in spring or in fall  
 Who sit and consider it all,  
 When they dream and they tarry  
 Like Manette and Harry  
 Gain strength to respond to the call.

May they share a great sense of release,  
 May they feel a deep spirit of peace,  
 Like the duo we love  
 Give them strength from above  
 And forever their blessings increase.

So Manette and Harry, all Hail!  
 As they toast you with bench and with ale,  
 Thanks for doing your parts  
 With your minds and your hearts  
 For God and for Country and Yale.

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## **Worship in Marquand, Where Usual Meets the Unusual**

*Worship in Marquand is different nearly every day, but it is always actively ecumenical: it aims to invite everyone to draw deeply on their own traditions, but to do so in a way that stretches and critiques those living traditions in order to open them up to as many other people as possible. We encourage learning about traditions of worship but we also encourage developing a mature*

*liturgical imagination and the ability to take risks, to be creative, and to improvise.*

--From *A Few Notes About Worship This Week*, distributed to alumni attending worship services in Marquand Chapel during Convocation and Reunions Week 2004

Morning worship services at Marquand Chapel during Convocation and Reunions Week were nothing more than the usual – the “usual” for Marquand, that is, but quite creative in the broader context of liturgical styles.

The traditional arrangement of forward-facing pews gave way to a diamond-shaped design—yes, the pews in 2004 are moveable—that created a more community-conscious space where worshippers faced each other. Hanging overhead was a work of art composed of colorful banners entitled “For the Healing of the Nations,” on loan from the Holden Village community in Washington State. The language was inclusive, in keeping with *Chapel Guidelines for Worship* that note, “Naming God only with masculine nouns and pronouns can create the sense that divinity is characterized by maleness, and not by femaleness, and this can both limit our knowledge of God and, potentially, negatively affect our view of men and women, made in God's image.”



The week's services were planned by Siobhán Garrigan, assistant professor of liturgical studies and assistant dean for Marquand Chapel, and Patrick Evans, senior lecturer in the practice of sacred music. Preaching at the three morning services were, on Tuesday, the Rev. Stephen P. Bauman, M.Div., '79, senior minister at Christ Church United Methodist, New York City; on Wednesday, the Rev. Barbara Lundblad, M.Div. '79, the Joe R. Engle Associate Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary, New York City; and, on Thursday, the Rev. Javier Viera, S.T.M. '98, senior pastor at Mamaroneck United Methodist Church in Mamaroneck, NY.

Wednesday's service marked the beginning of a new cycle of sung Morning Prayer in the African-American worship tradition—planned by Evans in consultation with the Yale Black Seminarians and Mellonee Burnim, distinguished faculty fellow of ethnomusicology and ritual studies. Worshippers sang Calvin Hampton's hymn *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*, with words by Frederick Faber, including the line, “If our love were but more faithful, we should take God at her word.” In the middle of her sermon on Jonah, Lundblad surprised the congregation by breaking into song.



Worship the day before, on Tuesday, featured hymns in the Eastern Orthodox and African American traditions, followed by a sung benediction from Malawi, *Let Us Go in Peace*, that concluded each of the three services.

Thursday's worship included an African-American hymn and a hymn for from the Iona Community in Scotland. As they entered the chapel, worshippers were each offered strands of ribbon. Near the end of the service, before singing the traditional favorite “Blest Be the Tie that Binds,” worshippers were invited to the center of the diamond to tie their ribbons together.

If Convocationers had visited Marquand Chapel in the weeks following Convocation, they would have observed more shifts in the pew arrangement to a large cross shape with an open square in the center. They would have experienced a worship service based on water and Christian symbolism, including an invitation for worshippers to enter the open square to explore the contents of a bowl of water—filled earlier in the service by dancers who carried pitchers of water to the bowl and then held the pitchers heavenward as water was slowly poured. And they would have become acquainted with a “Hearty Eucharist,” at which

worshippers are given a large chunk of bread rather than a morsel or a wafer and a cup of wine or grape juice rather than a sip—along with olives, cheese and olive oil—symbolizing the free and abundant offering of Jesus' life.

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**Convocation Worship Service  
Yale Divinity School  
October 12, 2004**



Rev. Stephen P. Bauman, M.Div., '79  
Senior Minister  
Christ Church United Methodist  
New York, New York

Luke 8:40-56

***Grace-full Interruptions***

Twenty-five years later, things have changed at YDS, among them, chapel, where worship is now organized around the daily lectionary. The passage we heard from Luke belongs to this particular day. I was asked to consider it, and I'm glad for this, because imbedded within these well-known healing stories lie powerful truths for the church that still reads and sweats them.

My seminary days are mostly a blur, begun when I was just twenty-one. I was mostly an emotional mess, confused, deeply uncertain about what I was doing here. As for that, I managed my work well enough, but oddly I have only scattershot memories of specific events and moments. I remember well my room in Brainerd. And Jim Dittes and his infamous class, "Commitment and Alienation." (I was pretty strong on the alienation side of things then.) Extending the three-year M.Div. program into five, eventually I found myself convinced of ordination. I was less sure about the denominational piece, but it has all worked out pretty well. I am, however, quasi-amused that I'm back here doing this, tracking the distance of my life between then and now.

While preparing these thoughts another memory came to me, about Harry Adams. I couldn't tell you which year it was, but sometime in the mid-seventies in the middle of a lecture on sermon preparation professor Adams suddenly stopped short and said something like this: "I want to interrupt this talk with a word about interruptions. They will inevitably happen to you. A day will soon come when you believe you are preparing your most erudite and important message upon which hangs the very souls of your congregation or at least your future ministry among them, when a difficult individual barges into your office or a crisis finds you on the telephone and you will need to drop what you're doing and attend to the interruption. Let me tell you right now that your ministry is all about the interruptions." Then he picked up his lecture where he had left it.

For some reason that bit of wisdom lodged in my mind like the bright North Star on that day, and now, some decades later, I find trap doors opening revealing depths of meaning within it I hadn't suspected back then.

We all know the worn cliché: Life is what happens when you've planned something else. Such bits of wisdom reach the status of cliché because they so obviously capture a piece of the truth. Tracking the course of our lives, wouldn't most of us say but for the interruptions to our plans, we would not be the persons we've become?

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Like you, I've heard many persons tell the tale of their life over the years. If I were to include my own, I've learned that most, if not all, profound spiritual awakenings come as interruptions, surprises. Afterwards we find them woven into our spiritual fabric, but at their first occurrence, we were unprepared. And haven't those of us who've been at this for a while learned that the really spiritual mature individuals we know are those who are in a sort of constant ready state for the new thing God intends? They're on the lookout for it; they have an instinct for it.

And of course this models the Jesus we find in the Gospels; we might even give him another name: "The Great Interruption," or perhaps, "The Great Interrupter." The power brokers thought they could put an end to the interruption, but here we all sit. And so it continues.

And so we read of the hemorrhaging woman and the healing of Jairus's daughter, multilayered stories intermingled by the dynamics of interruptions. On the way to heal the interruption of disease and death of one young daughter, Jesus is interrupted by another anonymous woman reaching out from the crowd.<sup>1</sup>

Here's what we know about her: once she had money and position, but she spent all she had on physicians. Sounds intriguingly contemporary so far. For twelve years she has hemorrhaged trying all possible means to relieve her misery. Notice the number twelve, the age of the young daughter. The Levitical codes stipulated that, if a woman hemorrhages for many days and not at the time of her impurity, she shall remain unclean. Every bed on which she lies shall be treated as the bed of impurity; everything on which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches these things shall be unclean and shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening.

This woman is an outsider of the first order. By religious proscription she should not be out in public because anyone who touches her, or even touches the chair she sits upon, would be tainted. She has a great physical agony, she has been stripped of her wealth, but more: she has a social and spiritual agony. She has become an untouchable.

She is bold, however. She has that spiritual instinct. Risking a breach of the religious mores, she interrupts Jesus' journey to Jairus's house and extends her hand to him in a spontaneous act of faith. Or is it desperation (Does it matter what we name it?)?

Confronted by Jesus, she spills out her story and is in turn surprised by his reception. Though he's already engaged in a matter of some import with a prominent member of the community, he responds to her with compassion, calls her "daughter," giving her a rank and position equal to that of the sick 12-year-old daughter of the leader of the synagogue.

As Luke recounts the tale, Jesus takes these interruptions and twists them into an interruption of the social conventions of his day to create a new sort of community. We all see it clearly, right? Just who deserves the name "daughter," and who doesn't? In this series of small, unplanned, surprising events, Jesus cracks the barriers of clean/unclean, up/down, and in/out. A desperate person at the top of the ladder and another at the bottom, both reach out to Jesus in their need, and through his compassionate response he reveals their true genetics.

Like Harry Adams said, "Ministry is all about the interruptions." Now, most likely, he had something more homely in mind back then; something more basic to the everyday experience for those of us who thought what we had to say was going to be so very important.

Since then I have found the harder, sometimes excruciating task has been to listen for what the Spirit has to say. For when the Spirit speaks, her voice invariably ruffles the feathers of those who believe they otherwise have the social and religious mores of the day nailed. It's no accident my saying it that way; after all, they nailed Jesus to a tree.

Of course, at our most mature we confess that “we” and “they” tend to blur into one and the same.

This is part of the perplexing mystery we attempt to mediate. Our situation is complicated. We are the handlers of a severe mercy. We often operate within a world of our own devising, blind to the imperatives of the truth we hold.

**SUCH A HOPE THE WORLD HAS A  
HARD TIME GRABBING ON TO.  
SUCH A HOPE EVEN WE HAVE A HARD  
TIME GRABBING ON TO. HOPE OF  
SUCH STAGGERING PROPORTIONS  
THAT MOST LIKELY IT WOULD BLOW  
THE ROOFS OFF OUR CHURCHES IF  
IT WERE FULLY EMBRACED.**

I vividly experienced this standing in the chapel of the castle at Cape Coast, Ghana, West Africa, an important embarkation point for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. There the floor of the Christian chapel doubled as the ceiling of the dungeon, which held tens and hundreds of thousands of slaves over tens and hundreds of years—captured, bound and sold for distant shores and, most tellingly, deemed unworthy of Christian mercy. The faithful standing on the heads of the slaves, as it were, who fully defended their economies for many centuries with sacred scriptures to excluding, deadly effect.

In the preface to his *Three Gospels*, Reynolds Price writes, “The church in most of its past and present forms has defaced...whole broad aspects of Jesus' teaching; but in no case has the church turned more culpably from his aim and his practice than in its hateful rejection of what it sees as outcasts: the whores and cheats, the traitors and killers, the baffled and stunned, the social outlaw, the maimed and hideous and contagious.”<sup>2</sup>

That's a devastating critique. Hard to argue with. On the other hand, we have also within our flawed tradition the seeds of the antidote. Most importantly, we worship at the altar of The Great Interruption, that living Spirit of Christ who calls us to join him in interrupting the easy, given conventions of the day that leave so many sons and daughters for dead outside the door of his home.

Part of the Mystery with which we've been entrusted includes serving a gospel of Hope, capital “H”. Such a hope the world has a hard time grabbing on to. Such a hope even we have a hard time grabbing on to. Hope of such staggering proportions that most likely it would blow the roofs off our churches if it were fully embraced.

Generally, I find Christians approach this hope with a tentative tenderness – when desperate enough, we'll reach out our hand to touch Jesus and call it faith, and he'll give us the benefit of the doubt, thank God. Thank God!

But I now yearn to be among those who are in the constant ready state for the new thing God intends. That's consistent with what I learned here over twenty-five years ago, and I'm trusting it will keep things pretty interesting for the next twenty-five.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> see Charles L. Campbell's commentary on the same story in Mark 5:21- 43 in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001, p. 209ff.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds Price, *Three Gospels*, Scribners, New York, 1996, p.33.

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**Convocation Worship Service  
Yale Divinity School  
October 13, 2004**



Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad, M.Div., '79  
Joe R. Engle Associate Professor of Preaching  
Union Theological Seminary  
New York, New York

Jonah 1:17 – 2: 10

## No Prayer for Nineveh

How could Jonah pray such beautiful words in the belly of a fish? Does it help to know it was a **large** fish? Surely he didn't have a copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1928 edition. The text does indicate that it took him a while: "Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. THEN Jonah prayed to the Lord." You and I could probably think up a fine prayer if we had three days and three nights. Of course many have insisted that the prayer is a later addition to the text. Jonah didn't think up the prayer. Somebody who had plenty of time wrote it and inserted it here, interrupting the narrative. It's clear that the story could proceed without the prayer, going directly from Jonah being swallowed to Jonah being spit up.

Whether the prayer was there all the time or added later on, here it is. Did someone want to redeem Jonah, to show his change of heart? "*I called to the Lord out of my distress, he prayed, and the Lord answered me.*" But Jonah hadn't called to the Lord when the storm was raging -- it was the sailors who cried out to the Lord. Jonah hadn't called to the Lord; Jonah had run when the Lord called. In his prayer, Jonah strings together verses from several psalms. We might try it...

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want  
I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help?  
God is our refuge and strength  
The Lord is my light and my salvation  
Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death  
I will fear no evil

Jonah knew the words. He could sing the hymns by heart. **But he didn't mention Nineveh.**

Nineveh, the great city. Capital of Assyria, sacked long before Jonah prayed.

The ruins of Nineveh are now within the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. The Mosque of Younis (that is Jonah) is there, on the left bank of the Tigris River. If you go to [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul), you will learn that there is a room inside the mosque that is the prophet Younis' shrine. "On the walls of the room one can see the whale bones."<sup>(1)</sup>

Of course Jonah wouldn't mention Nineveh. He was trying to forget Nineveh, hoping that God would forget, too. "*As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.*" Jonah would rather be in the sanctuary of the great fish than in the streets of that wicked city. "*Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.*" Have the readers forgotten? It was the sailors who offered a sacrifice to the Lord. It was the sailors who made vows. In case we've forgotten, Phyllis Tribble reminds us: "Between the genuine worship of the sailors and the genuine repentance of the Ninevites comes counterfeit piety from loquacious Jonah."<sup>(2)</sup>

"I called to the Lord...  
 out of the belly of Sheol I cried...  
 I went down...  
 I remembered the Lord...  
 I will sacrifice to you...  
 What I have vowed I will pay...  
 I, I, I, I – I, Yi, Yi, Yi, Yi!"

Jonah was grateful to be saved from the watery deep, from the weeds that wrapped around his head. "Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" he cried. (My deliverance is what he meant.) God had heard enough of this liturgy. The Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. The text doesn't say where Jonah landed, but he had some walking to do!

Nineveh was not on the coast, not in Israel. Nineveh was inland in what is now Iraq. The ruins of Nineveh are within the city of Mosul, third largest city in the country. Several US military bases are there: Camp Performance, Camp Leader, Camp Strike, Camp Top Gun. "Camp Performance offers a café with a variety of both American and Iraqi cuisine including the Sunday special of a double cheeseburger with fries." (3)

"The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city..." When Jonah forgot the name, God remembered. So it was that Jonah picked himself up and made his way to the great city. After a day's walk, he proclaimed God's message. Like the sailors, the people of Nineveh believed. Everyone fasted -- from the king to the cattle. Not only that, but everyone dressed in sackcloth -- from the king to the cattle. It must have been quite a sight!

Jonah never prays for "Nineveh." God is the one who remembers the vast city. Jonah gets out of town as fast as he can. He builds a booth outside the city, a little chapel where he watches and waits to see what will happen. Perhaps God will yet destroy the city (though Jonah fears this isn't likely). For Jonah knew that God wasn't fair, and he had told God so: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love..." Jonah knows that God will spare the city and it makes him so mad he wants to die. Then God appointed a bush -- even as God had appointed a large fish -- and Jonah is happy again. Safe in the shade of the leafy bush, safe from the burning wind, safe as he felt in the belly of the fish. But when God causes the bush to wither and die, Jonah is furious all over again. What good is sitting in the chapel if you have to look out on a wicked city not going up in smoke?

God has the last word in the story: "You're concerned about the bush for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Jonah never answers God's question. That question is still hanging in the air today. How do we pray in the belly of the fish, in the innards of the sanctuary? Three years ago when we gathered in New York City to pray, "God bless America" came from a place of deep grief and fear. We sang in the light of votive candles in Union Square Park, surrounded by the flyers of the missing. "Have you seen my father?" We prayed for our beloved, broken city, our traumatized country. I don't know when the prayer turned, when the words began to sound different. The date is no more exact than the dating of the book of Jonah. We wrapped the prayer around us and shut out the rest of the world. "God bless America, land that I love." We didn't mention Nineveh.

**HOW DO WE PRAY  
 IN THE  
 BELLY OF THE FISH,  
 IN THE INNARDS  
 OF THE  
 SANCTUARY?**

Nineveh is the name of both an ancient city and a contemporary province in northern Iraq. The ruins of the Assyrian capital are now encompassed by the city of Mosul. A street in Bridgeport, Connecticut has been renamed in memory of Tyanna Avery-Felder killed April 7 th in Mosul.

Attacks in Mosul averaged 60 per week in September. (4)

How do we pray in the sanctuary, in the belly of the Empire? Perhaps we no longer need to pray. In 2003 our country had a military presence in 153 of the 189 member countries of the United Nations. (5) Prayer shapes us even as we shape our prayers.

Jonah might have been changed if he had prayed for Nineveh as fervently as he prayed for himself. How shall we pray, you and I, sitting here in this chapel in the belly of the Empire?

God bless the world we love,  
 Stranger and friend;  
 Go before us, restore us  
 With a hope that despair cannot end.  
 Ev'ry people, ev'ry nation,  
 Mighty ocean, heaven's dome.  
 God bless the world we love,  
 Our fragile home.  
 God bless the world You love,  
 Our fragile home.

## Notes

1. [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul.htm) (October 10, 2004), 3
2. Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis : Fortress Press), 172
3. [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/mosul.htm) (October 10, 2004), 3-4
4. "Bridgeport street renamed Tyanna Avery-Felder Boulevard": Many sources including [www.newsday.com](http://www.newsday.com). Statistics about attacks in Mosul from AP article by Jim Krane, "Iraq violence eclipses rosy declarations": Several sites including [www.bismarcktribune](http://www.bismarcktribune) (September 24, 2004)
5. Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York : Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 288

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### Convocation Worship Service Yale Divinity School October 14, 2004



Rev. Javier Viera, S.T.M., '98  
 Senior Pastor  
 Mamaroneck United Methodist Church  
 Mamaroneck, New York

Jonah 3.1-4.11; Luke 9.18-27

As the father of two very young daughters, I have become intimately reacquainted with children's television. Not surprisingly, one of my daughters' favorite programs is Sesame Street. They have a favorite segment on that show, a game called "Which one is not like the other?" The point of the game is to look at four images, three that are identical and one that is different. One image intentionally stands out as different from the rest, and the point is to pick out that image.

I felt as if I were living that game a few months ago when my brochure for convocation arrived. I opened it, began reading, and then noticed my picture toward the bottom of one of the pages. Otis Moss, Stephen Bauman, Barbara Lundblad, Peter Gomes, and Javier Viera. I could hear the song playing in the background, "Which one is not like the other?" I'm thankful to YDS for this opportunity, but couldn't you have a little mercy?

But let me stop whining, for challenging circumstances often give way to new learning and growth. Take Jonah for example. Didn't Jonah believe that God had given him a difficult task? Although I happily accepted my daunting task, Jonah resisted his preaching invitation wholeheartedly. Interestingly, Jonah didn't believe that preaching destruction to Nineveh was the difficult task; rather, the difficult task was seeing God for who God really is. Jonah couldn't bear the thought that God was bigger, more complex, more wonderful, and more gracious than what Jonah had come to believe.

We picked up the story after Jonah's thrilling escape scene, and now Jonah and God are reunited. Once again Jonah is told to go to Nineveh. This time he obeys, he preaches the shortest sermon in history, and it is a resounding success. It was heard as God intended and the result was what God desired, but nothing could have displeased Jonah more. "Ah Lord," he says, "this is why I tried to escape; for I knew that you are a gracious God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm." In other words, Jonah refused to see God for who God is.

I can identify with Jonah's dilemma. There have been times in my ministry where seeing God in the fullness of God's complexity hasn't served my purposes. It hasn't fit my agenda or preference. I'm not proud to admit that two weeks ago I preached a sermon I secretly hoped would finally send my biggest headache out the door and into someone else's door. But God has a way of taking our words and doing with them things we never intended.

Instead of leaving my nemesis stayed, enthusiastically. She now claimed to be supportive and was ready to lead and participate in a new way. But I wasn't ready. I had unresolved feelings and it was tough to imagine continued collaboration with this person. However, what I'm learning through this is that I have to set aside my own definitions and expectations in order to make myself available to God's perspective and intentions. Where I saw a parting of the ways, God saw reconciliation. I desired an easier reality, whereas God envisioned a love I have yet to master.

Jesus may have suspected that his disciples had a similar reticence to see him in his fullness. "Who do people say that I am?" he asked them. They answered, "John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again." They didn't know what to make of him. Jesus was an enigma of sorts, so many different and opposing things all at once. One thing was certain, however-- they were drawn to him, but their individual expectations of who he should be limited the disciples' ability to see who he actually was.

**AS LIFE CONTINUES TO  
UNFOLD, I'M INCREASINGLY  
DRAWN TO A GOD  
WHO IS AS NEAR AS MY NEXT  
BREATH, AND YET IS STILL  
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COMPREHEND.**

Perhaps sensing this, Jesus gets personal. "Who do you say that I am?" I wonder if that's another way of saying, "Okay, there's John the Baptist, Elijah, an unnamed prophet, and me. Which one is not like the other, and why?" Peter, always eager for Jesus' attention, pipes in: "You. You're not like the others. You are the Messiah of God." And for a moment it seems that Peter has been able to see Jesus in his fullness. But this is the same Peter who will later deny having any association with him. This is the same Peter to whom Jesus will say, "Get behind me Satan!"

"Who do you say that I am?" wasn't an easy question to answer. Messiahs were supposed to have power, were supposed to take charge, set things right, fix problems. Jesus did none of this. He came saying things like, "This is God's way: the poor are blessed; the rich have a big surprise in store for them; prostitutes and swindlers get into the kingdom before you do; hate your mother; go sell everything you have and give it to the poor; and, by the way, I will be killed, buried, but I'll rise again three days later."

Messiahs weren't supposed to say things like that, and our present-day domesticated Jesus rarely does. But that was, in fact, part of his message. And even Peter, the one who it seemed had the right answer, couldn't see him for who he really was.

I suspect we have something in common with Jonah and Peter. Although we've been trained at Yale and have thus developed sophisticated means of reasoning and articulating the faith, we nonetheless struggle to hold in tension the immensity that is God. It's not just the fundamentalists who proof text, we do it too. We teach and preach the faith in a way that tends to be in concert with our own hopes and expectations. Perhaps, that's all we can really do, at least if we're to have integrity, but we're mistaken if we think that our hopes and expectations commit God to being the God we would like for him to be.

As I get older I feel less certain that I have or ever will understand who God truly is. For some reason, I bought into the fallacy that as one matures and grows older life will become clearer and less complicated. While this hasn't actually been the case, I still secretly hold on to that expectation, thinking that just around the corner after the next transition, the next challenge, the next growing experience awaits a life that is easier and more predictable.

I wonder if Jonah and Peter had similar expectations. Maybe that's what their resistance was about. Maybe that's what our resistance is about. And that's a dangerous realization to have, for once we name it, it leaves open the possibility that God might just be more than we can bear or handle.

Strangely, that sounds like Good News to me. As life continues to unfold, I'm increasingly drawn to a God who is as near as my next breath, and yet is still a mystery I cannot comprehend. Holding those two realities in tension feels more honest than anything else I might try. Hopefully, what is happening is that I am less invested in trying to define God and more invested in having God define me. And I think Jonah and Peter learned that when that happens life becomes more interesting, more exciting, more truthful, and more balanced.

Friends, we have lived the consequences of humanity's insistence on defining God, and people have paid and continue to pay with their lives. Now we're a divided nation; a world at war where brutal divisions and hatred persist, and there is seemingly no end in sight. But imagine for a moment a people defined by God rather than the other way around. Imagine a people who are gracious, slow to anger, abundant in lovingkindness, and who relent from doing harm. Doesn't that sound amazingly relevant?

Long ago, God took a collection of tribes and gave them an identity they lacked. As we will sing in just a moment, God said, "Once you were no people, now you are my people." From that moment on they were no longer defined by others, by what they lacked, by their checkered past. Instead they were defined by a future that had renewed meaning and purpose, and they were defined by the nature of the God who seeks and saves the lost. I also think this sounds amazingly relevant.

God is not ours, we are God's, and that makes all the difference. The psalmist said, "Be still and know that I am God." That seems like a good place to start.

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