

LIVING MYTH PODCAST

Episode 372 – Jonah and the Whale

Deluge and floods stories have been found all over the earth, even in landlocked places, as if to say that it is not simply the literal seas that are being addressed, but also the psychic waters of the unconscious that can flood forth and overwhelm an individual or an entire culture at any time. The primordial ocean is one of the greatest symbols of all-inclusive change, as well as being a symbolic womb from which all life came. In a sense, we are living in flood times again, and two of the archetypal tales about the oceans of change involve figures that are best known from Bible stories.

Both the story of Noah and the great deluge, and the tale of Jonah and the whale involve great storms at sea. Yet the nature of the two prophetic characters, and the core message of each of their stories differ greatly. When not viewed as part of religious texts, both Jonah and Noah can be seen as figures drawn from folktales and from oral traditions that preceded all written texts. Noah was a mythical character in ancient tales long before he played a role in the religious stories. There were other ancient characters who set sail amidst great floods during times of all encompassing change. Some say that Utnapishtam who appeared in the ancient tale of Gilgamesh was the first Noah, but Manu in the myths of India was also a primal predecessor who faced an even earlier flood.

In terms of mythic imagination, Noah is one name for the ancestral faculty for invention and the internal instinct for survival that continues to inhabit the soul of humanity. Old Noah, in that sense, is a part of our inner nature, an indelible, unsinkable inhabitant of the human story, and part of the mythic inheritance of every living person. Noah learns that a flood is coming in a dream in which God speaks directly to him, instructing him to build an ark and in other ways get ready for the great deluge. In order to follow his calling, Noah has to fashion a ship for a flood that no one can see and that did not appear for some time. The old dreamer had to hold on to his dream and his calling to be on the divine mission until the time was right for change to occur. Noah remains true to his dream and his calling. And when the great rains come, and the seas begin to rise, he's ready with his ark and the plan to bring representatives of all species on to the ship, in order to weather the worldwide storms of change.

In contrast to Noah, who heard the voice of the Divine and immediately began building a great arc, Jonah refused to listen to a divine message. In his case, God spoke directly to him, calling upon him to go and preach in the city of Nineveh, where people had fallen into various kinds of sin. Jonah refused to accept the divine mission, and instead decided to flee the dilemma by setting sail on an ocean-going ship. God responds to this refusal by summoning a great storm that threatens to capsize the ship and endanger everyone on board. Like Noah, Jonah is on a ship in the midst of a great storm. But unlike Noah, Jonah is trying to flee from God, from the presence of the Divine and from his own calling.

The sailors on the troubled ship become anxious when they realize that this is no ordinary storm. They question who might be to blame for the predicament they all find themselves in and Jonah admits that

he is the likely source of their troubles because he refused a mission from the Divine. Amidst intense discussions about what to do, Jonah suggests that if he is thrown overboard, the storm will likely cease. At first the sailors refused to do this and continued rowing against the storm. But when the tempest only worsens, and all their efforts fail, the sailors feel forced to throw Jonah overboard, in order to save their own lives. As soon as Jonah falls into the dark sea, the storm ceases and the waters become calm. The ship that was intended to provide his escape sails on, and Jonah finds himself in the beginning of what has come to be known as the night sea journey.

Although cast adrift and abandoned in the great ocean, Jonah does not drown because God enters again and sends a great fish that swallows him. We now know it as a whale. But at that time, people did not know what whales were. It was simply called the great fish, or sometimes called a leviathan. Instead of passing through an outer danger, like the formidable clashing of rocks in the tales of Homer, the journey of Jonah leads him down and back, as if into the great womb of life. In order for him to accept his calling and his connection to the spirit of life, he must descend down into the depths of the unseen to be born again from darkness.

In biblical versions, Jonah repents for his refusal to follow the call, and promises to do all that he is called to do and go preach to the people in the city of Nineveh. And at some point, the great fish, or whale, miraculously spits him out to a place near his destination. Then conquering his fears of speaking in public or being a vehicle of spirit, Jonah becomes the reluctant prophet, and begins speaking the message of God to the people of the city. And surprisingly, everybody, including the most wealthy and powerful people, put on sackcloth and begin to fast and repent for all their wrongdoings. And then God, seeing this change in their ways, spares the people and the city from destruction.

Both Jonah and Noah wind up in rough waters and both are eventually brought to dry land and are able to enter a new phase of life. But how they arrived there and what they undergo appears drastically different. Noah appears to have no doubts about the divine Word, and that it will come to some kind of fruition. Jonah, on the other hand, is notorious for his uncertainty and his reluctance and finally, his decision to flee in the opposite direction, from where the instructions from God tell him to go. Noah appears as a protagonist in accord with God while Jonah, as antagonist, stands apart and refuses to answer the call and accept the divine message.

In the story of Noah, the ship, or Ark, serves as a life preserving vessel in the midst of the flooding waters of change. And in the tale of Jonah, the life enhancing vessel turns out to be a great fish or whale, swimming in the deep waters of life. Instead of conquering a dragon, or a demon, the would-be messenger of God appears to die after being swallowed into the depths of the Leviathan, which acts as a kind of Cosmic Womb. In psychological terms, there is an existential regression that takes the initiate all the way down into the unconscious, which also represents going all the way back to the very beginning, so that the subsequent rebirth repeats the original act of creation. To emerge from the belly of the whale involves a passage from the darkness of primordial chaos, to the light of creation.

In many ways, we are in a reluctant, collective descent, that has parallels to this old story of Jonah and the whale. Like Jonah being tossed out of the ship and into the deep ocean, there comes a point where there can be no turning back. Like Jonah, we can turn away from our own calling and try to escape the

sense that we are here to undergo a thorough transformation, which opens us to the possibilities and the potential of our own lives. Yet in the end, we fall into the troubled waters anyway. And we wind up in a process of dissolution that we tried so desperately to avoid.

In alchemy, the term that suggests falling into the dark ocean and into the depths of the unconscious is *solutio*, the word from which we get solution. And it can be said that all major life experiences tend to be *solutios*. That if we do not avoid or refuse, or run away from the challenges and the losses in our lives, we will find ourselves descending into the depths, not to become lost, or simply disappear, but to dissolve the restricting aspects of our own egos, in order to loosen the psychic space and allow the deep self, the knowing self, the creative self to rise and become more conscious to us.

Like Jonah, and like Noah as well, we are each called to a meaningful purpose in life, the kind of purpose that used to be imagined as a divine mission. In religious texts, the one being called by God becomes a prophet, and a spokesperson for a system of belief. But in mythology, they represent someone becoming a protagonist in their own unique story. Each calling has something divine in it because it comes from the otherworld. Yet what is being called to is a divine spark that is the natural inheritance set within each human soul.

That is why the tales of Jonah and Noah being called by God can resonate with almost everyone. The reason there needs to be diverse tales about calling is because people see and hear and react in different ways. Some hear of Noah and his dream and realize that they also have dreams, dreams that can be interpreted, and messages that can be found and be followed. Others need to hear about falling and failing, about being rejected or cast out, in order to recall how they heard a call, but turned away and fled from it. As the ancient stories told it, there may be just one road of life and death, but people are strewn all along it. Some keep refusing messages from the Divine that are sent to them, despite the old saying that the calling keeps calling. Others find a place, a profession, a temple, where they are accepted and simply remain in that place, to some degree in the vicinity of the Divine, while managing not to truly answer the call. They may have the sense that the Divine is nearby, but they do not intend to be swallowed in order to be reborn.

One reason a story like Jonah being swallowed by the whale continues to exist, is that people need to know that in order to be fully alive, we must transform and that in order to transform, we must descend to the depths before we can rise to the heights of spirit. Part of the message of the story of Jonah is that the divine doesn't punish him for his refusal, but rather, when he feels most lost and abandoned, sends the whale to act like the womb of the rest of his life.

When seen in more psychological or mythological terms, the tale of Jonah is less about punishment from the Divine and more about becoming aware of the inner resources and the true potential of our own souls. Once inside the belly of the whale, our ego or persona has little importance. After all, it was developed to present a certain face and a specific demeanor to the outside world. In the depths of descent, there is no one there to impress, or to trouble over the fact that the ego must be dissolved to some degree. It is common to have a great fear of being lost and being abandoned. And yet, there is a deeper self that can not only survive the descent, but also understands better than us the true purpose and aim of our lives.

Here on Earth, we typically must lose our common sense of self in order to find our deeper sense of a unique self that carries and knows how to express the true spirit of our lives. It is this deeper self that is the agent of solutio. The deeper self is the source of wisdom. And in the dark night of the soul, or the night sea journey, what is worth saving in the ego becomes saved, while what is not worth saving, what is wrongheaded, misguided and riddled with fear is dissolved.

As late as the 18th century, many serious researchers were interpreting the Jonah story as a historical account, they became obsessed with trying to identify the exact species of great fish that swallowed Jonah. At the other end of the spectrum of interpretation, mystics from various faiths and practices imagine that the inside of the whale was illuminated with its eyes being like church windows, so that those who surrendered to being swallowed would find not simple death or annihilation, but a rebirth of imagination that transformed the belly of the whale into a temple or a cathedral. In this deeper and greater vision, the belly of the whale becomes a place of revelation of the inner mysteries of the soul. Rather than being the belly of the beast, the interior of the whale becomes the place where the Divine is reborn in the deep self and soul of the seeker.

As was the case with Jonah, the aim of a descent is not simply bringing back a treasure, or an invention, but rather a gathering of knowledge and wisdom that is otherwise missing in our lives. The psychological term a "Jonah complex" is used to describe the evasion of one's own destiny, the fearful instinct to run away from one's natural orientation in life, and the pattern of undermining our own talents, and resisting giving those gifts we are intended to give to the world. The retrieval of knowledge from the depths is unique in each case. And in each case, it involves an expansion and growth of the individual soul that, similar to Jonah, can help change the common world.

The emergence of knowledge and loss wisdom from the depths exists in contrast to the notion of ideas that are being handed down from above. We live in dark times now; we are in a collective descent. And one of the old sayings was, "When you find yourself descending, dive deeper," because that old wisdom trusted that, in the depths, each person could find their own connection to the deeper self. In being willing to descend to the depths, we become able to bring back timeless knowledge that can also turn out to be very timely in the common world. This redemption from below can become the source of genuine hope, the kind of hope that comes from passing through despair, the kind of hope that can lead to a psychological and spiritual regeneration.

The story of Noah has already survived many floods and radical changes in the world. And that in some ways is a tribute to the willingness of Noah to be true to the dream that gave him the wisdom of the Divine. That includes the knowledge that the nature of this world involves the mystery of life, death and renewal. In that sense, the story of Noah and his ark and surviving the great deluge may serve as the collective story for the times in which we live. The story of Jonah may cut closer to our own hearts because it depicts how common it is to ignore or neglect or refuse to answer our own calling and deny the instinctive sense that we are secretly connected to the divine.

Seen that way, the story of Jonah and the whale may serve in helping us to better realize that we are each called, that we are each a prophet in our own soul. At least we are so if we are able to find and

willing to follow that which calls to our own unique souls. In following Jonah, we struggle through not only our fear of death, but our particular way of fearing being fully alive. In finding our way to the shores of self-revelation and awakening to why we came to life to begin with, we help add presence and meaning to the world. And then the meaning of an old saying becomes revealed, that is to say, if we do not abandon ourselves, we do not abandon the world.