

Super long, but such a great story. I like that story. True, God's way more vengeful than I'm comfortable with. This is Hebrew Bible God, and Hebrew Bible God more often than not goes to extreme measures to get the point across. But I like the story anyway.

I've always appreciated a really good anti-hero, so maybe that's it - they always feel more real to me, more human than the good as gold or evil as sin characters. The Bible is full of such characters - no doubt you'll encounter another one or two of them as we continue through this series of Heroes and Songs - and Jonah is a classic case. A man called by God to act heroically in his story, but he can't quite cast himself in that role. The road he's being called to is too dangerous, too arduous, and the people.. hardly worth it. Ninevites were Israel's sworn enemies, after all. He runs... but God has other plans. Plans that involve a storm and a large aquatic animal to get Jonah's attention. That's another theme that recurs a bunch in this series - the great lengths God is willing to go to in order to get our attention.

I love this kind of story. So often it's stories like these that foster our connection to faith and to God and to each other. From an early age, we hear these stories, we listen to these tall tales of ancient people living and learning and changing because of what

they learned, and we hear the story and it becomes a part of us in turn. That's the power of a good story.

There's this piece of theology that I really like. It's been shared and spoken of by very distinguished theologically-thinking folks in the three major religious traditions of the world - Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. That might be why I like it so much: it's one of those really important moments of connection across scriptures and belief systems. The language varies depending on the tradition, but I'm going to borrow the language used by Elie Wiesel, a writer and holocaust survivor who died this past week.

Goes like this: It is entirely possible that God created humans because God loves stories. It's entirely possible that God created humans because God loves Stories.

I love that. I use it a ton because our stories are how we connect to each other and to God, full stop. If we want to truly get to know someone, we share our stories and we listen to theirs. Stories are what takes a person from stranger to friend, from disagreement to at least begrudging respect. They are how we state to the world and to God precisely who we are, and where we came from and where we might be going and what hurdles we overcame to get there. What is a life but a collection of stories, and if it is entirely

possible that God created humans because God loves stories, then our lives, our very existences, are sacred.

What are our scriptures if not stories, of people who lived and did stuff and told people about it, who told people about it, begat, begot, begotten, until someone wrote it down? Stories, the language that we use to tell them, so often they shape what we know for sure to be true about God and about humanity. From the time we are children. It's why I think kids' ministry is so very important to our church and to the world, and It's certainly why Scott and I chose to devote an entire series to these epic heroic stories in the bible.

I might be biased, however, because I come from a long line of devoted fish storytellers. And when Scott and I were divvying up the stories for this series, I requested Jonah because I feel a bit of a kinship with Jonah.

You see, I, too, have been eaten by a whale.

Kind of.

You see for three years during seminary, I was pretty sure I had the best holiday job in the world, performing in the Shedd Holiday

Fantasea show at She'd Aquarium in Chicago. This meant that for 2 months each winter, I got paid to sing and play guitar while dolphins and belugas swam around us, doing behaviors, and penguins marched very stately across a walkway, and a sea lion name Ty saluted the trainer to earn himself a mouthful of restaurant grade fish. It was like living in a Holiday Themed Lisa Frank folder. And it was awesome.

Less than awesome was the fact that it always intersected with the run up to finals week at school and that it meant my Christmas Eves were spent doing 5 shows in a row with a tiny lunch break. So most of my memories of the holidays during that time revolve around broken guitar strings, rubber wading boots, frantic paper writing in the performer's greenroom, and missing my family so much it hurt.

There was this part of the show that we would put wading boots on and trudge out through a foot of water to stand on an underwater platform and sing a song about how glad we were to be home for the holidays, which I always thought was ironic because I never actually got to be home for the holidays. And The last year I did the show, during our final rehearsal, I was standing out on the rock, one foot up on a boulder and the other in the water next to the edge of the platform, and I felt this light pressure

on my foot. We were mid-song, but I glanced down and was shocked to see a huge, glowing white beluga nudging my foot with it's mouth, the big squishy melon bobbing back and forth.

We weren't supposed to interact with the animals when we were in the enclosure. Their training is so specific that it would be really easy for us to mess it up if we did something wrong, and so we weren't even supposed to make eye contact with the belugas, but here was this kind, beautiful animal trying to get my attention.

I was good, I turned away and kept singing, and pretty soon, the nudging turned into nibbling. Nothing menacing or anything, just the aquatic mammal equivalent of a kid poking you trying to get your attention. The trainer was standing behind me, saying "it's ok, ignore her and she'll go away, and keep calm..."

And I'm like, "How could I possibly stay calm, this is the coolest thing that has ever happened to me?!"

And pretty soon, the nibbling turned into outright pressure all around my foot, and I couldn't help myself and I looked down and my entire foot was enveloped in the mouth of this beluga. Which is not something that happens everyday. I'm not sure if i stopped guitaring, but I definitely stopped singing for a moment, and rules

went out the window, and I looked deeply in the eyes of this beautiful animal, and got lost for a second.

There's a depth in the eyes of such animals, like they've seen some stuff and they ain't talking, like they know something that we don't, like maybe they are really used to God using them to get humans' attention, using them to remind us of mutuality and that we are all connected to each other and to the world and nature and to God, and it happens so often that their perception and understanding has ascended to a whole other level. Or something.

We had a moment, that whale and I, and it's kind of weird and really hard to explain, but in that moment, it didn't matter how homesick I was or how much I desperately wanted to be home for the holidays like the song said, or how much finals homework I had that I'd been stressing about.... The whale had called me back to the present, welcomed me there, invited me for just a moment of connection at a time when I felt utterly disconnected. By chewing on my foot.

I suddenly remembered where I was and returned to my music, and the whale remembered where she was and returned to her splashing and glorious breaching, and the moment had passed.

The next day one of my professors asked me how my aquarium gig was going, and I was like, “OH MY GOSH THE MOST AMAZING THING HAPPENED YESTERDAY”. and I told him, and he laughed, “Sounds like a Jonah moment to me!” His eyes narrowed “So Katie, What was God trying to tell you?”

What was God trying to tell you?

We are a people and a world of intertwining stories. More profoundly connected through experiences and computer screens and shared laughter and miles traveled together than we could possibly comprehend. And I think it's easy to forget that, or at the very least, ignore it. When faced with odds that seem insurmountable or people that seem too different or schedules that seem to hectic, it's really tempting to shut down. To run the other direction. To ignore the still speaking voice calling us to stop for a second and remember who we are. Where we come from. To whom we belong. To celebrate our inevitable connectedness, even if just for a second.

We are a people of stories. Good, bad, hero, anti-hero, they all belong to God. What's your story?

Amen.