

The wrong way to protest

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It's easy—from the comfort of my desk, where I'm healthy, well fed and securely employed—to experience a sense of "enough," as I [wrote last week](#). It's easy to champion compassion, justice and peace (what's not to like?), even when it puts me at odds with a few biblical texts. And it's pretty easy to fit such ideas within an ordinary Christian theology.

What's difficult is figuring out how to adopt and live out such ideas on a case-by-case basis. The details, as they say, are where the devil comes to play.

I'll gladly pay a premium for food responsibly grown and delivered; but if one has to choose, is it better to buy organic or local? I want to support the ingenuity and hard work of entrepreneurs, but it's tough to learn definitively if their business practices are socially and environmentally responsible enough to merit buying stock in the company. I believe in the importance of justice, but isn't there a better way to punish white-collar crime than to send perpetrators to jail, sticking taxpayers with the costs? And I believe in compassion and mercy, but should a repentant but serial child molester really be free on the street?

It is not always clear what and how one should protest tradition or authority, especially when it comes to religious tradition or God's authority.

In contrast to biblical texts that model appropriate voices of protest against God's word, there is at least one model of wrong-spirited protest: Jonah. The book is odd and a bit funny among its biblical company. Jonah is an unusual prophet. While other prophets go on for pages with lofty and heartfelt oracles delivering God's message

to the masses, Jonah proclaims only one, one-sentence oracle. And most strikingly unlike the other prophets, Jonah's oracle works. He calls for repentance and immediately gets exactly that.

Yet it is this that Jonah protests. He whines to God that he knew all along that God would be merciful and compassionate, so why bring Jonah into it? He's so angry that he wishes he could just die, which seems a bit overblown. God's gently chastises him and soon after is met with yet more protest from Jonah, angry about the death of a plant that God had provided for shade.

God's correction to this second protest, as with the first, is couched in a question. God presses Jonah to think for himself, to apply his intellect, his spirit, his own humanity to the matter. If Jonah felt so bad about this plant for which he bore no responsibility, why shouldn't God care about the simple Ninevites, and all those animals, too?

Along with providing an example of wrongful protest, the story cautions us to choose wisely, to humbly bring brain, spirit and heart to the challenge of discernment.