

The Christian lady preacher and the queer Jewish poet

If I could give every new pastor a gift in their first year of preaching, I'd give them a friend like Jessica Jacobs.

by [Amy Peterson](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Samia Ahmed)

Today Jessica called me from Massachusetts. She'd been on a long bike ride when her handlebars broke and she nearly crashed. While walking the next couple of miles to a repair shop, she decided to check in on me. I'd been blue over the weekend and avoiding calls.

This time I picked up. Jessica is a Jewish poet and the founder of Yetzilah, the first literary organization in the United States for Jewish poets, so I knew she'd be horrified and entertained by the story I'd just heard of a long-dead parishioner who had once hosted a seder at church. The woman had served hot dogs, and she'd refused help from a local Jewish friend, saying she didn't want the seder to be "too Jewish." When guests arrived, they found a table set up with personal photos of her trips to the Holy Land.

"Are you trying to rage-fuel my walk to the bike shop?" Jessica asked.

"Yes!" I said. "Is it working?"

I met Jessica Jacobs a few years ago, when she was the visiting poet and I was the chaplain in residence for a writing workshop in Seattle. We shared dinner and argued about, among other things, the merits of a recent midrashic novel by a Jewish author (which I had just reviewed for the century—see the review of Sarah Blake's *Naamah* in the May 22, 2019, issue). When I moved to Asheville, North Carolina, in 2022, I knew she lived here, but I was nervous about getting in touch, as our connection had been brief.

Then one hot September day, on the banks of the French Broad River, I heard someone calling my name. I turned but did not recognize the woman in a baseball cap and shorts as the elegant poet I'd met on the other side of the country. Disoriented, at first I assumed she was a parishioner: in the previous two months, since starting my new role as associate rector at Trinity Episcopal Church, I'd met hundreds of people whose faces I couldn't yet place. But she quickly identified herself, to my delight, and proceeded to show my kids how to inflate a kayak.

I like to tell the story that way—hearing my name called by the river and not recognizing the voice. I like the way it puts us in a long tradition: Samuel in the night, Jacob fording the Jabbok, Miriam and a princess by the Nile. We're people who hear voices; we're people who find God by the water; we're people who tell such stories.

That's what we started doing, anyway—meeting at the river every couple of weeks to walk, and pretty quickly we were talking about everything. Our mothers, our marriages, the poets who are good poets and the poets who are good people, the songs that get stuck in our heads, and—nearly always—the scriptures.

For the first time in my life, I was preaching on a regular basis. After a conservative evangelical childhood—in which I'd been taught that women couldn't preach and should be staying at home with their children—and a contented adult life teaching and writing and mothering, nourished and fed as a member of my local Episcopal church, I'd been called, unexpectedly and with some reservation, to become a priest. The summer I turned 41, I graduated from divinity school, got ordained, moved my family of four, and began a new job, all in the space of two months.

In many ways, preaching was the easiest and most pleasurable part of the change. I am the daughter of a preacher, and as a trained writer and teacher I already had skills that transferred fairly easily to the pulpit. I'd had fantastic professors and mentors in preaching. But the rhythm of regular lectionary preaching required a set of muscles I had not yet developed. I developed them while walking the loop of the French Broad River with Jessica.

Our curiosities aligned, though our backgrounds and contexts didn't, and because of that I felt a freedom I'd rarely felt in conversation. She was outside of my professional clergy network, so I could test out ideas without worrying about heresy or my reputation. As a Jew, she helped me remain alert to anti-Judaic tendencies within my tradition, not just the astonishingly terrible hot dog seder moments but the subtler moves as well, like the ways the lectionary sometimes seems to pair Hebrew Bible texts with New Testament texts in order to highlight the presumed superiority of the latter.

We walked through winter rainstorms and late spring slush, the blooming of hydrangeas and the ripening of blackberries. We walked through the cemetery at dusk as the fireflies came out; we sat on her porch watching clouds lit by the moon. As attentive as she was to me and to scripture, she was equally attentive to the natural world, cutting me off to swoon at the smell of pine needles on the path, pausing to let her dog Solace greet passing puppies, or switching sides so she could more easily pluck the blackberries. (She gave most of them to me.)

Not unrelatedly, she had a tendency to ground my sermonic seedlings in the here and now. Where I saw a lesson about divine-human relationships, she would see a lesson about human relationships that I had skipped right over. She was often right, yet at the same time her insistence on this world and our efforts to repair it reminded me of the real differences in our perspectives. She has an immanent frame; I see the transcendent breaking in. She has a higher view of humanity than I do and thinks human compassion can save the world; I think we are in need of divine intervention (and I think we get it). Her perspective helped me remember that in Christian preaching, I don't just want to land on "a truth"—I want to land in the gospel truth.

The freedom of our relationship, the guard against anti-Judaic tendencies, and the pull to the natural and human world are all good gifts of our friendship, but perhaps the best gifts are Jessica's insight into the Hebrew text and knowledge of Jewish midrash. She had just finished years of intense study of the book of Genesis, study that led to the collection of poems she was nearly done writing, and meanwhile I was skipping through Genesis with the lectionary. Tell me about Noah, I'd say as we walked. Tell me something interesting about Babel. Tell me what to do with God instructing Abraham to bind his son and place him on the altar.

"Are you not allowed to criticize God in your sermon?" she asked at one point.

"No," I said, after a pause. "I don't think I am." Another difference.

A week before the lectionary gave me the binding of Isaac, Jessica was hosting the inaugural Yetzirah Jewish Poetry Conference at UNC-Asheville, bringing Jewish poets from around the world to our mountain town. Some of the events were open to the public.

Between vacation Bible school prep, a memorial service, and pastoral care calls, I slipped out of church and into a back row in the student union's Blue Ridge South Room. I was there to hear Alicia Ostriker in conversation with Nomi Stone—but I didn't expect that almost immediately the poets would start talking about the text I was about to preach. The story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac, Ostriker said, has had more commentary written about it than any other passage in the Hebrew Bible. "And we might say all of the interpretations are right," she continued. I began taking notes.

One commentary says that Isaac must live, because the son of laughter must continue laughing for God to remain sovereign. Isaac is the first Jewish comedian, Ostriker said: all Jewish comedy begins with “my father wanted to kill me.”

One commentary wonders why Abraham argued with God about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah but didn’t argue with God’s command to offer up his son. Another says the ram was in the thicket all along, but Abraham wasn’t looking.

One commentary, Stone noted, says God was disappointed that Abraham didn’t understand that he was supposed to refuse to obey.

Back at home, with those wonders echoing in me, I turned to my draft copy of Jessica’s manuscript, to read again what she had done with this text. Her poem “Why There Is No Hebrew Word for Obey” begins with an epigraph from Eric Hoffer: “Absolute faith corrupts as absolutely as absolute power.” I read her poem three times and then started writing.

I don’t usually send my sermon manuscripts to Jessica, but I did send this one. “You plagiarized my poem!” she teased. Had I? No, I didn’t use her words, but in the middle of my sermon I had borrowed the poem’s structure, its movement. And I’d borrowed (with attribution) Rabbi Esther Adler’s idea that Stone had mentioned—that God was disappointed that Abraham didn’t refuse to obey.

“It’s a mistake Christians throughout the ages have made, over and over again, too many times to tell,” I wrote. “Dip into any time period, and you’ll find Christians sharpening their knives in supposed obedience to God: during the Reformation, for instance, one group of Christians killed another group of Christians over different beliefs about infant baptism. So sure they were right in their interpretation of God’s commands that they were willing to put their brothers and sisters on the altar. Today, some Christians, so sure they understand what God says about gender and sexuality, are willing to put their queer siblings on the altar, without asking any questions.

“And there have been times in my own life when I have felt certain I knew what was right, and tried to prove my righteousness by my obedience. I wonder whom I have bound and put on the altar because I was unwilling to argue with God—when I have been more concerned with proving my own righteousness than with love.”

Jessica returned the manuscript with a line added: "I wonder when I have wrongly sacrificed myself."

"Thank you for that gut punch of an addition," I wrote to her.

"What?!" she replied. "I'm sorry!"

When we next met at the river, I elaborated. There was nothing to apologize for. Sometimes it just hurts a little to be seen so well.

The next week she emailed me. "It occurs to me that the gut punch should maybe live in the poem, too," she wrote. "Do you like it with these lines added?"

. . . My daily gods
are minor ones: of pride, of lust,

of impatience and complacency.
Yet how many have I harmed

on the way to what I thought
was right—or,

with hindsight, on the way
to what I wanted? And how many

sorry sacrifices have I made
of myself?

What if we turn
from certainty and arm ourselves

instead with questions?
Obey, obey, obey is everywhere

in translation. The real word is
shema: listen.

Now our conversations live there, in that poem, and in a few others I pushed back on, a few endings I'm proud to say I changed. And they live in my homilies. Gifts, I believe, for both of us and for our communities.

Sometimes we're talking about these sacred texts, and I wonder where in the text we are: Where are the women? The queer poet and the lady preacher? The female friends arguing as the sun sets and stopping to photograph the heron over the water? And then I realize: kindred spirits (as well as some not-so-kindred ones) arguing about what God said and what it means is basically what the Bible is. (Scripture is more than that, certainly, but it's not less than that.) We're living in the sacred text; we're doodling in the margins, and our chicken scratches are getting added to the record.

In her essay "Put Away Your Sword," Anna Carter Florence says that "poets are close kin to us preachers, I think, because they take words as seriously as we do: poets believe words can change a world." She continues: "Preach the text, offer it in all its thickness and inscrutability . . . [remembering that] our authority as preachers doesn't come from having answers or making sense. It doesn't come from being right about a text; it comes from being true to it." She quotes Wisława Szymborska, who says genuine poets "must also keep on repeating, 'I don't know.'" This repeated admission, key to poetry and to midrash, has also become key to my preaching.

Just ten months after she called my name at the river, Jessica left Asheville. She'll be back, at least for a little bit, and sometimes now we walk separately with a phone line open between us. If I could give every new preacher a gift in their first year of preaching, I'd give them all a Jewish poet friend like Jessica, someone to whom they could every week say, "I don't know."

In the final poem in her collection *unalone*, Jessica describes Torah as a tree she climbed in childhood, as a place where roots and sky converse, as a tree that twines into the poet and into all God's people, who find themselves "in that overstory, unalone." If, by some miracle of grace to a gentile, I get grafted in, how good to be grafted next to her, our roots mingling in the riverbank.