

“Finding Your Inner Prophet”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, January 24th, 2021

Jonah 3

It’s always been about the whale in this short book in our Bible called Jonah. It’s always been about the whale that swallows Jonah. And Jonah lives inside the whale for three days and three nights, and then after praying to God for help, the whale spits him out onto the beach. This is the rather fantastical part of the story. But isn’t the whole story. If you take five minutes to read the whole thing, you’d find out that it’s really about a very reluctant prophet and more importantly, it’s about us.

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.” And why does he flee? Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and they were a cruel regime – brutal and deadly.

“So Jonah went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.” He hides in the boat thinking God will never find him there. But God knows exactly where to find him and God sends a storm that threatens to break up the boat. When the sailors discover who Jonah’s God is, they put two and two together and figure out that God is angry at Jonah. So, they toss him overboard, and the storm calms. And here comes the part that many of you know. Jonah is swallowed by the whale, and stays in its belly for three days and three nights. After Jonah prays to God in his distress, the whale spits him out on the beach. Then the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” Jonah goes a day’s walk into the city and preaches the shortest sermon in all of history, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people and the king repent, covering themselves in sackcloth. Even the animals are covered in sackcloth. The king says, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind.” And God does see, and God does change his mind. And the people are spared from God’s anger, and they live.

But then we read, “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.” And why is Jonah angry? Because God changed his mind and did not destroy the people, a people who deserved to die in Jonah’s mind, a people who were cruel and blood thirsty killers. Jonah goes out of the city and sits down to see what would become of the city. God causes a plant to grow over Jonah to give him shade. And Jonah is very happy about the plant. But the next day, a worm destroys the plant, and the sun rises and beats down on his head and Jonah asks God to die. God says, “Are you mad that the plant died?” “Yes,” Jonah says. “You loved the plant?” “Yah!” Then God says, “Well, I love Nineveh!” So, the moral of the story is, ‘God loves the people you hate.’

While Jonah should have been thrilled to have the largest public conversion on record that would have made Billy Graham envious,¹ instead, he sulks under the plant. He is set in his prophetic ways – a prophet announces doom, and the doom is supposed to happen. God says to Jonah, I am going to love Nineveh. And leaves Jonah fuming beside his dead plant. As a commentary notes, “Jonah has closed his eyes and his mind to what is the will of God in this particular situation, misled as he is by his own rigid and unyielding view of the prophetic office.”²

This week as part of the Social Justice Commission I’m on, I watched a December 2020 panel discussion on drug addictions and overdoses moderated by Jeffrey Dale, from Shining Waters Region. The discussion focussed on Harm Reduction and Supervised Consumption Sites. Jeffrey was interviewing Joe Cressy, councillor for the City of Toronto and Ann-Marie Kungl, Councillor for the City of Barrie. They discussed the stigma around drug addictions and overdoses that prevent society from responding to what is an invisible crisis. In November, twenty-seven people died from overdosing. People are dying of drug overdoses in lonely places like restaurant washrooms. Societal stigma labels a homeless drug addict as a loser. The purpose of a harm reduction center is to keep people alive so that they can access treatment. It moves discarded injection needles from playgrounds to safe sites. The panel emphasized that the role of society is to care for each other, to care for those who are struggling. But in reality, there is tremendous push back from the Not In My Back Yard mindset – NIMBY for short. Not in my Back yard am I having drug addicts loitering around, with resulting crime and illegal drug sales for my family to see. Not in my community.

It is societal stigma that labels people in a way that condemns them to a life and a path of loneliness and frustration. Cathy Crowe, Toronto Street Nurse, laments: “Many of the homeless people I met had so much talent, fight, imagination, and creativity, but they were trapped in their situations. Everywhere there were reminders that I was nursing in a community that was shut off, shunned by the rest of the world.”³ She continues, “We label people who are homeless, and that allows us to depersonalize them ... People who are homeless are not ‘street people’... I have met and known thousands of people who were homeless, and I can’t think of one who deserved it, who chose it.”⁴

Shaun Loney writes that there are 250,000 homeless people in Canada.⁵ 250,000 people who have no place to call home, no kitchen to cook in, no bedroom to sleep in, no income to buy food with, no medical assistance, no psychological support, and often no family support. As a society, have we written the homeless off? Are the labels, the stigma getting in the way of our sleeping inner prophet?

¹ www.workingpreacher.org Commentary by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, accessed January 22, 2021. Commentary on Jonah 3:1-5, 10 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary

² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 245.

³ Cathy Crowe, *Dying for a Home: Homeless Activists Speak Out* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 9.

⁴ Crowe, *Dying for a Home*, 29.

⁵ Shaun Loney, *The Beautiful Bailout: How a Social Innovation Scale-up Will Solve Government’s Priciest Problems* (Canada: Friesens, 2018), 133.

Was Jonah changed? We don't know. We left him sulking under his dead tree with a closed mind. Unyielding. Rigid. We too can be stuck in our 'expectations' of the way things should roll out. We can be stuck in our way of looking at the world. Even prophets get stuck. Shaun Loney notes, "We each have a set of these deeply held beliefs that help us to interpret the world and understand the relationships between things. *Unlearning* helps us understand these mental models, and how they can limit our thinking and creativity."⁶ Unlearning is *also* part of the prophet's work, so that the prophet can be a vessel of God's grace.

In my work to figuring out what it means to be that prophetic voice for God, if my fingerprints are all over the work at hand, it is not God's work. If my fingerprints are all over it, then it's my expectations, my demands that are dictating the roll out, just as Jonah was 'scripting' God's response. Jonah exercised an 'ownership of the prophecy' in that he wanted it fulfilled by the destruction of the Assyrian people. And Jonah is us. We hang on to control, even when God is involved. Our fingerprints are all over it.

Somewhere out there, Jonah is still sitting beside the dead plant. God left him in the dirt, to ponder what had happened. Perhaps the person who got the story *most* right was the King who says to his courtiers, "*Who knows? Who knows what God will do?*"

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Loney, *The Beautiful Bailout*, 32.