

Epiphany 3 – January 21, 2024

In today's sermon I wish to talk about the journey to wholeness that being a person of faith invites us on.

I think this journey includes three crises. The crisis of identity, the crisis of trust, and the crisis of compassion.¹

The First Crisis: The Crisis of Identity

'Arise, Jonah, go to Nineveh, that great city and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me'.

God's word comes and rearranges Jonah's world.

Nineveh, the capital of the fierce Neo-Assyrian empire, is a great city, but for all the wrong reasons. Nineveh spells violence, death, torture. This city of the hostile stranger is to become the primary orientation of Jonah's ministry.

And Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from before Yahweh.

I love the subtlety here of Jonah's response: Jonah flees! Something, is out of alignment, something in Jonah is displaced, driving him to flee.

Jonah thinks to himself, "All is ready for a lovely Mediterranean holiday – tangy sea breeze in the air, bottle-nosed dolphins racing alongside the ship, salted olives jostling in clay jars on deck."

And Yahweh hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came ... that the ship threatened to break up.
And the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. And they threw the cargo ... into the sea ...
And Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship ... and was fast asleep.

Yahweh storms, the sailors shudder, Jonah snores. Yahweh throws the wind, the sailors throw the cargo, Jonah throws a blanket over himself.

The scene is set: storms and ships, sleeping Jonah and the seven sailors.

And the captain said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will consider us and we won't perish.'

No response ... So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Still no response

... they up the ante.

'Tell us, please,

¹ This sermon draws from my article 2009 Anstey, M. P. "Becoming a public theologian: Jonah's journey to Ninevah", *St Mark's Review* 207, 37–48.

who is responsible for this calamity upon us?
 What is your occupation?
 Where do you come from? What is your country?
 From what people are you?’

In a word, who are you? Tell us who you are, because our future depends on it!

‘I am a Hebrew. I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’

Not very flash, but very honest: I am a Hebrew. I worship Yahweh.

They ask him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?’

And Jonah says, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea.’

Finally, the drama is over. The storm is gone, Jonah is gone.

Jonah faces, I suggest, the crisis of identity because Nineveh confronts him with his inadequacies.

In this crisis, Jonah has to articulate who he is.

Nineveh demands a self more deeply centred, a self that knows its ‘hidden wholeness’, in the words of Thomas Merton.

Uriel Simon writes: ‘Throughout the story, Jonah’s flight from his God has been inextricably linked with his flight from his own life.’ The strangers are in the presence of someone estranged from himself.

The Second Crisis: The Crisis of Trust

The cost of his awakening was being thrown overboard, to face imminent death.

Further formation is required. Enter the whale.

Jonah goes from the abyss of the sea to the abyss of the whale’s belly, the dark night of his soul.

‘I called to Yahweh out of my distress, and Yahweh answered me.’

Jonah does not leave it as a vague, non-specific distress, he lays it out in all its detail:

‘You threw me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.’

‘I have been banished from your sight.’

The sense of abandonment by God is thorough. But then, a counterpoint:

‘Yet, I will look again toward your holy temple.’

Jonah, despite this dark night, chooses to face God's temple. He faces the location where God's glory is most concentrated.

We could be forgiven for thinking this new orientation will lessen Jonah's lament. It does not:

'The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever'.

Yes, Jonah is facing God's glory ... but with one foot in the grave. And then the second counterpoint:

'And yet you brought my life up from the pit, O Yahweh, my God.'

He began his prayer with 'You hurled me into the deep'; he counters with 'You brought my life up from the deep'.

Jonah's naming of these contrary experiences affects a change in his demeanour. He modulates to a more reflective key, less anguished:

'As my life was ebbing away, I remembered Yahweh; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.'

And then, as is so often the case with such weather-beaten prayers, Jonah unearths a deep theological insight:

'Those who worship vain idols forsake their *hesed*' ... their true loyalty, their 'covenantal faithfulness'.

Hesed is this and much more. If one word sums up all the vitality of divine love and action in the world, it is *hesed*.

This is the crisis of trust, which confronts us when we ourselves are emptied, cast into the deep, dark waters. And from this place, and no other, metamorphosis comes. Here is Jonah's:

'And I, with the voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to Yahweh!'

The result? The result is what we read today in chapter 3.

Jonah preaches and they turn to God.

Surely this would lead to a happy Jonah, a satisfied and content Jonah...

Crisis 3: The Crisis of Compassion

Chapter 4 however begins with these words:

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.

Let me give you the sense of the Hebrew:

Jonah was frickin' furious!

'O Yahweh! Is not this what I said would happen? So that's why I fled to Tarshish.'

'O Yahweh, you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.'

'O Yahweh, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'

I've had it. I'd rather die than watch those hypocritical Ninevites act all holier-than-thou! What will Yahweh do in the face of this rage?

Yahweh said, 'Is your anger doing good?'

Not 'Is it right for you to be angry?'

Rather, 'Are you productively angry?'

The emphasis is on the expression of anger. What is the outcome of your anger Jonah, for yourself, for your family and friends?

Is your anger leading to hostility or hospitality? The text offers some insights.

Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

Depicted here is the quintessential arm-chair theologian, secure at a distance, uninvolved, having severed the solidarity between preacher and parishioner, the politician and people, the prophet and the poor.

The 'who' we are sent to becomes the 'what' we observe. Yahweh, thank God, does not tolerate this for long ...

Yahweh God provided a tree, and made it come up over Jonah, to shade his head ... and Jonah was very happy about the tree.

But ... the next day, God provided a worm that attacked the tree, and it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a hot east wind, and the sun beat down on the Jonah so that he was faint. Jonah said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

So God questions Jonah again:

'Is your anger about the tree doing any good?'

Jonah's response drips with cynical sarcasm:

'My anger is 'doing good' up to death.'

You want productive anger Yahweh? My anger is producing ‘goodness’ to the point of death. Who thought being a person of faith could cause such despair and resignation? Yahweh has the last word:

‘You are concerned about the tree, for which you did [nothing]; it came ... and perished in a night. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a 120,000 persons who do not know right from wrong, and also many animals?’

God ends with the searching question: what about the city?

The interpretative puzzle is, why does chapter 4 come after chapter 3?

Jonah has embraced his identity, he has learned to let go and trust God, and he has had stunning success in ministry. What more is needed?

The problem is that a word of peace can still be delivered by a person of hostility.

This, I suggest, is the crisis of compassion.

Will we orient ourselves to welcoming the outsiders, to the horizon of the other, or to the horizon of our own reflection, which leads to violence towards self and other?

Hence the third stage of formation is embodying the hospitality of the message we bring, *becoming the message we preach, becoming the meal we celebrate*.

Conclusion

Let me suggest a way of tying together these three movements of becoming.

In this story, Jonah’s journey overshadows Jonah’s destination. Hence becoming a person of faith is brought into focus.

In the crisis of identity we learn to do the interior work of coming to view ourselves clearly, compassionately. We learn to *befriend* ourselves.

In the crisis of trust we learn to do the interior work that will bring God fully to birth in our life. This is about letting go, surrendering, figuring what things are worth dying for, and what things can be left alone.

In the crisis of compassion we learn to listen, to speak softly, to enter into those conversations that will bring us fully into solidarity with ‘the world grown weary with the burden of itself’.

The story of Jonah shows that to deliver such an unwelcome word – ‘Preach against the city and its wickedness’ – *the critique of the prophet must precede the critique of the city*.

Being a person of faith is about becoming the message we preach, becoming the meal we celebrate.

Otherwise the scandalous message is smothered by the scandalous messenger.

Jesus identified his scandalous mission with the story of Jonah – his journey as a prophet on an agonising journey. The endorsement therefore of Jonah’s journey to Nineveh as a paradigm for our own journey to personal wholeness and integrity is indeed well-founded.

Amen.