
Love colours outside the lines
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
January 24, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20

[image: jonah and whale]

Who remembers the story of Jonah? I'm sure we all do. But do you remember the part we read this morning, or do you remember other parts? Most people connect the name "Jonah" with a story that involves a whale. That's the part we all remember, right? Where Jonah is thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale, and vomited up at his intended destination. That part is more memorable than the part of the Jonah story that we just read. So if you didn't remember the part of the Jonah story that we read today, I think I can understand that. Because the part we just read is even more unbelievable than the part about the whale.

The mythical story of Jonah is so short that I am tempted to read the entire story right now. But I'm sure we all remember the high-lights. God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh, and Jonah refuses and takes a boat heading away from Nineveh. The boat encounters a storm. Jonah is disobeying his God. And his shipmates are very superstitious. So they throw Jonah overboard hoping to appease God. Jonah is then swallowed by a fish and is later delivered to Nineveh. It's not a very promising start for someone called to serve God.

[image: jonah preaching]

But Jonah does eventually go to Nineveh and he walks across the great city. And he does preach repentance to the people, and the people actually do repent. And God spares the city from destruction. Isn't that a fantastic story? A reluctant leader actually helps the entire city to repent and to be spared from the wrath of God. So what does our heroic leader do? Does he celebrate his great success? Does he decide he must really be a great prophet? Does he decide to take up a new career in motivational speaking? Does he realize that perhaps God's plan made sense after all? Well no - Jonah actually sulks because God did not wipe out the city. Jonah is actually angry that God changed God's

mind and did not slaughter the inhabitants of the city.

[image: jonah disappointed]

If that is news to you, it's likely because our lectionary carefully avoids the sections of the text that demonstrate Jonah's petulant nature. On this occasion the authors of the lectionary put CNN to shame. They white-wash and selectively represent the original text extremely well. And you know that when I say that, it's not really a criticism. It's just a great reason for us to ask the question - why did they do that?

The authors of the lectionary probably imagined that we would relate better to a Jonah who actually was on the same wavelength as God. Perhaps they thought that we - faithful people that we are - could completely understand a Jonah who simply listened to God's word and followed along with the plan. Perhaps they thought we would not understand a Jonah who was self-absorbed, petulant, selfish, and not particularly creative or imaginative.

Well - if so - I've got news for those lectionary authors. Because personally, I find it pretty easy to relate to a Jonah who was - at least sometimes - scared, lazy, angry, and more than somewhat opinionated as to who should - and who should not - enjoy God's grace. And I can completely understand a Jonah who thought that his own life plans were much better than anything that God might have in mind.

The Jonah of the lectionary is completely impossible. The Jonah of the complete story is someone we meet every single day - even in church. Even in this church! We ourselves can easily get so absorbed in our own plans. So busy with our own business and so busy with our own busy-ness that we can fail to hear the still small voice of God. The story of Jonah is a classic story for that very reason. It is - in fact - our own story in many ways. What do we do when our sense of God's plans are at odds with our own? How do we tell the difference?

[image: Jesus calls fishers]

And what about the disciples in Mark? Jesus calls them and they leave their nets instantly. They don't finish their work, they don't go home to pack a few things. They don't even go home to get their phone chargers. They just go.

Does that make them people of great faith? Or does that just make them idiots?

Are they really a model for how we should live out our own faith? To act without reflection? To act without thinking. That's often how this story is reflected in sermons. The disciple's faith was so great and Jesus was such a compelling individual that it just happened like that. It was spontaneous and completely out of the blue. James and John just up and leave their father - apparently without comment from either party. It's a miracle. If we read the story that way, we might believe that we are called to act more impulsively.

But perhaps that is under-reading the story just a bit. For one thing, that way of reading the text requires us to gloss over the first line of the reading. Does anyone even remember the first line? You might have thought it was just a segue. It's, "After John was arrested".

As we know, Jesus went to John the baptizer in order to be baptized. But John was the leader of a little group, a little band of people who were waiting for the coming of the messiah. Yes, strangers and "tourists" came to be baptized by John, but many scholars believe that John also had a semi-permanent group of followers. John had a core group of his own disciples. And it's not hard to imagine that Jesus was part of that core group. Many scholars believe that Jesus would have initially been one of John's disciples. But when John was arrested, Jesus took over the group as its new leader, and also took the group in a new direction.

It's not a completely popular theory of course. Some people don't like to think that Jesus was a disciple himself before he started his own public ministry. And yet today's reading is almost a literal take on this idea. After John is arrested, Jesus "takes over" and calls the disciples - people who already knew Jesus because they were all part of John's core group - to go on a road trip with him. This idea explains why the disciples simply followed Jesus instantly, and also, why Zebedee did not put up a fuss. Jesus was already well-known to James, John, and Zebedee. Perhaps James and John had been anticipating the call from Jesus all along. Which is why they follow Jesus with no resistance or hesitation - and for that matter, with no reaction at all. So perhaps the disciples were not crazy. Perhaps their decision to follow Jesus was thoughtful and considered, but their thinking was done prior to the events in our story today.

It's an interesting idea. The idea that Jesus's ministry grew out of John's ministry. And that Jesus took the ministry from the confines of a river bank and took it to the streets. John baptized in one particular river, but Jesus took the ministry on the road, travelling around and visiting with people where they were. Jesus met people where they were - both literally and metaphorically. Jesus literally took John's group in new directions by taking them on the road.

Who knows - that could even happen right here.

[videos around Brantford re engagement]

[image: fishing]

For both Jonah and John, God had bigger plan than what they could imagine. Jonah resented the idea that God's grace could be bestowed on the people of Ninevah. And John was content to let people come to him, But Jesus went to the people where they were. Both stories are a call to us to reach out beyond our own comfort zone to connect with other people where they are.

Now before you stop listening I just want to make a couple of things clear.

It's not this [slide: colouring outside lines]

It's not this [slide: sailing ship going off the edge of the world]

It's not this [slide: here be dragons]

It's this [slide: bulletin cover, love is outside the lines overlay brantford]

We do not need to fear what we might find out there. God is already there. Love is already there. Yes, we don't know exactly what to expect, but it won't be dragons. We will find God and we will find love. Love colours outside our own lines.

Right now, we are all in lock-down. The church building is closed. In important ways, our community - Brantford - is closed too. But that will change in 2021. The church building will open up. Brantford will open up. The only real question is whether or not we will let our hearts open up. And whether we will embrace whatever we find on

our own streets. We need to embrace and bring love to whatever - and whoever - we find beyond the lines.

Some people say, “Go big or go home”. I say, “Go big, because that is home”.

This week, I invite each of us to read the complete book of Jonah. And to reflect on how ministry and mission happen - not by being perfect, not by pretending to have all the answers, but simply by being open to engaging in our own community in new ways, and by making mistakes along the way. Mission happens when we explore ideas and plans that are not our plans. To seek out new life in many and varied ways. To open ourselves to wonder what God might intend for this place at this time.

If God can use irresponsible people like Jonah, and uneducated people like fishermen, there is no doubt that we ourselves are involved in the coming of the kingdom of God. Let each of us - like Jesus - go out and meet people where they are - both literally and metaphorically. The world is waiting. But it's waiting out there.

Amen.