

Sermon Archive 199-A

Sunday 29 April, 2018

Opoho Church, Dunedin

Lesson: Jonah 2: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



From the belly of a fish comes a post-traumatic psalm - a prayer for deliverance. "The deep surrounded me, weeds were wrapped around my head. Waves and billows; at the roots of the mountains."

This is the cry of someone for whom the environment has become a hostile horror. For goodness sake, in what kind of distorted natural order does someone pray from the belly of a fish!? The beautiful creation has become something that eats us up for breakfast, that swallows us up. How on earth did we get to here?

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How did we get to here? The story of Jonah begins with the phrase "the word of the Lord came to Jonah". It came with something you could describe as a command, or a request from God - certainly it came as a religious responsibility. It's a call for Jonah to speak to the people of a certain city about how they are conducting themselves. Jonah is called to point out to the people of Nineveh that they're getting it wrong. The text is kind of vague on the exact nature of their wrong, but we're told that they had "violence in their hands". Violent towards one another? Violent towards the world in which they lived? Violent towards themselves? Nobody knows, but violence is key.

The ruins of violent Nineveh lie, these days, across the river from modern day Mosul - location of the ferocious nine month battle between the Iraqi government and the Islamic State - during which 500,00 civilians fled the city. Two and a half thousand people were killed in the conflict; with a further four thousand prisoners executed afterwards. This part of the world has a well established tradition and history of violence. Things were going wrong in Nineveh, and Jonah was called to name it - to declare it, to confront it. His response? His response was to run away - fast in the other direction. How does Jonah end up with weeds wrapped around his head? Drowned in the depths of the ocean, worrying about the foundations of the mountains, dislocated from the natural order and praying from the belly of a fish? The first step towards all that is running away from what he knows is the

truth - refusing to accept the reality - that humanity is getting it violently wrong. Humanity is getting it wrong - we run away.

Thomas Brunner, a surveyor from Nelson (up the road) set out down the West Coast in 1846. He was looking for land suitable for farming. Among his provisions he carried two guns, biscuits and tea, and seven kilos of tobacco. Thomas obviously enjoyed a smoke. He died at the age of 52. Travelling down the coast, he contended with sand flies and rain. He enjoyed neither - and chronicled his double dislike. He fell into the habit of trekking for a week, then camping for a week. During the camping week, he'd restock his supplies by fishing, hunting, gathering cabbage and tree roots. The natural order gave to him generously - and a good, sustainable pattern settled. On one occasion, however, the natural environment failed to open its pantry, and Thomas had to tide himself over a lean time. He did this by killing and eating his dog. He described the dog meat as "something between mutton and pork - too richly flavoured to be eaten by itself." Having killed and eaten his companion animal, Thomas was thereafter known by his Maori guide, Kehu, as "Kai kuri" - which means dog eater. An unfortunate epithet, but what's a man to do when he's hungry and the environment resists! (Violence in the hands.)

Talk about the environment not delivering! Thomas was having practically no luck finding the farming land he was looking for. Everything was far too steep, wet and mossy. However, half way up the Arahura river valley, he did find something interesting. He found land that was full of coal. Coal is good for burning. Coal is good for powering big machines and warming the city. Coal is good for selling. So he established a coal extraction industry right there and then - and named it after himself: the "Brunner mine". Because the Brunner mine's coal was of really good quality, it became a really popular fuel. It was sold everywhere, and contributed to much of the air pollution experienced by Victorian Aotearoa New Zealand. No other fuel was burned as significantly as Brunner coal. It made our world just a wee bit dirty.

In 1896, there was an explosion in the Brunner mine. Every one of the sixty five miners inside the mine was killed. There's some debate about how many of the sixty five died as a direct result of the blast, and how many died of the gases that followed - gases referred to at the time as "after-damp". Rescuers reported that many of the bodies recovered had froth around their mouths, so it seemed that gassing, rather than explosion was the main cause of death. The Brunner mine disaster remains our country's worst industrial accident. It didn't, of course, deter the industry from mining for coal. Coal continued to be considered

necessary. We did after all have our machines to run, our cities to heat, our sales to make. The industrial machine continued to be hungry - kai kuri, violence in the hands, humanity is getting it wrong, and Jonah's going to end up in the belly of a fish. Don't turn away Jonah. Name it. Declare it. Confront it. Whatever you do, don't turn away. If you turn away, you'll be covered in weeds. You'll be drowning in the ocean. You'll be praying from the belly of a fish. The word of the Lord insists that you speak, you act, you do.

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I lived in China for a while. It was a good experience. China accounts for 47% of coal burned globally. It is estimated that China burns 4.2 billion metric tons of coal each year. What's a country to do? After all there are machines to be driven, cities to heat, sales to be made. One day in China there was a temperature inversion. A lack of cloud at night meant the earth cooled quickly. Hot air rose, and cold air fell. It became a perfect scenario for trapping, down at ground level, the pollution that normally would dissipate up into the sky. On my way to work in the morning, I couldn't see more than a hundred metres in front of me. What I could see, though, were the people of China going about their business in the usual way. I was stunned, appalled by the filthiness of the air - but nobody else was. I found myself wondering, amid the mess, how bad it would need to get, I thought, for people to react - to say "this is not normal. Something's gone wrong." Jonah, go to Nineveh, and call them to account. Call out the violence in their hands. Name what they cannot see - the ways they damage themselves. Where are the voices for the earth?

Jonah, the denying, disobedient one, ends up in the belly of the fish, stuck in some unnatural and frightening situation, because he refuses to hear the word of the Lord, and refuses to confront the people about the violence in their hands. Jonah, don't turn away. Speak the word of the Lord.

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Praise God! We are told that, at the end of Jonah's lament from inside the fish, God spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. Does spewing sound horrible? Sick? Violent? Sick creation is spewing . . . And yet it puts Jonah back on firm ground - back where he belongs. And what happens next? Next, a second time, an insistent time, the word of the Lord comes to him, and says "get yourself to Nineveh". The call has not gone away. Things in the big dirty city are still awry, and the call persists.

Where are the voices for the earth? The prophets are the ones who hear what Jonah's narrator calls "the word of the Lord". The prophets are the ones who know there is violence being done. The prophets are the ones who have learned that we cannot turn away - that there is a great responsibility that must be faced. The prophets are the ones who sing, pray, cry, from an unnatural place, who name and mourn the wrong. The prophets, the voices for the earth, are those who, even eventually, go into the city to speak - to call for a better, less violent way.

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There it is.

The rest of the story of Jonah is quick and simple. Jonah goes to the city, confronts the people. The people repent, and the city is saved. Jonah is annoyed, because he's been outed as someone saying "Nineveh will die" - and Nineveh has done the opposite. Would that Nineveh had died! I wish it *had* - better result than this egg on my face! Bloody victory of life!

Whereupon the word of God gently reminds Jonah that it's good the city didn't die. The city is full of 120,000 people who don't know their left hand from their right - and also many animals. Don't forget the animals! Brunner eats the dog - the fish is spewing, and God finishes the story of Jonah saying "don't forget the animals". The last words in the book of Jonah are "and also many animals". Something other than the human order receives the final word of concern.

Jonah runs away. God's love for the other over-flows. The prophet story ends, while the calling begins.

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Where are the voices for the earth? The word has been spoken. The prophet's ear has been pricked. Where are the voices for the earth?

We keep a moment of quiet . . .

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