

The season of Epiphany is often associated with the idea of *calling*.

Hearing the voice of God.

Vocation.

Which comes from the Latin word *vocatio* – which, while it sounds like a flatbread speckled with rosemary and sea salt, with a hint of olive oil, actually means call or summon.

It's connected to root word from which we also get voice.

Grammar fans might think of the vocative case –

*...a grammatical **case** which is used for a noun that identifies a person...*

*A **vocative** expression is an expression of direct address by which the identity of the party spoken to is set forth expressly within a sentence.*

It's an interesting connection.

Vocation as that which names us.

Vocation as that to which we give voice in the world.

I think there is this beautiful connection between vocation/voice and embodiment/articulation.

Throughout Advent and into Epiphany we get great moments of call.

Great moments of things being spoken into being.

An angel speaks first Elizabeth and then Mary into the vocation of motherhood

Elizabeth speaks Mary into a vocation of blessed-ness

Mary gives voice of her own agency and prophetic potency in the Magnificat

Joseph is called in a dream to play his supporting role

Shepherds are called to bear witness

The community of Bethlehem answer the call to extend hospitality

The Magi hear the call of the night sky and come and follow and then hear a call of dream that sends them home another way

The people of Judah and Jerusalem hear the call to a new way of being come from John who is called Baptizer and then answer the call and give voice to newness through immersion (baptizing) in the waters of the Jordan River

When the rich and powerful come intending to pay only lip service John is unafraid to step into his vocation and speak truth about their exploitation of the weak and poor.

Then Jesus of Nazareth comes to the Jordan, and in his baptism hears a voice naming him beloved

Both our readings from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures likewise involve iconic stories of call.

The story of Jesus on the shore of Galilee is a great one which offers opportunity to reflect on the how the calling of fishers to leave nets and follow Jesus perhaps makes most sense within the social and political context of the Roman transformation of Palestinian fishing industry.

Folks know I do love a good deep dive into the material conditions of labour during Biblical times and how they elucidate Scriptural narratives, but for today, I am going to focus on Jonah, and you can find a reflection on this Gospel story as it appears in Matthew looking at the roles of carpenters and fishers in the Galilean economy that I preached last year linked here.

https://mcusercontent.com/a0f92b629ef5d45b6f7677645/files/feba9480-7da3-4acd-a926-13f4c37be0bd/Sermon_January_26_2020.pdf

Thanks to Dan for posting the link in our comments.

From the Hebrew Scriptures we hear one of the final parts of the story of the prophet Jonah.

It's a short writing, it would probably only take you 10 minutes or less, and while its not quite knee slapping hilarity, it's got this wry ironic humour to it which is often present in Scripture, although can often be missed when it's read with an assumed religiosity.

You can find the whole text (not even 3 whole pages) here:

https://mcusercontent.com/a0f92b629ef5d45b6f7677645/files/d1772047-2f74-4cda-a2f1-458656b5e563/The_Book_of_Jonah.pdf

Jonah is part of the *Trei Asar* the book of the Twelve which is the final part of the *Nevi'im* (Hebrew for spokespersons) which is the second of three parts of the *Tanakh* the Hebrew name for the

Hebrew Scriptures – Torah (law or teachings), *Nevi'im* (spokespersons or prophets), *Ketuvim* (the Writings).

The *Nevi'im* begins with the former prophets, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and the Book of Kings, then the later prophets, the longest prophetic books Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel which are followed by what the Hebrew Scriptures considers one book, the Twelve (Protestant Old Testaments divide these into twelve distinct books).

Jonah is set in during the time in which Israel is divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms which are at odds with one another, specifically during the reign of King Jereboam the second.

While most of the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Scriptures see the prophet speaking to their own people, calling them to faithfulness to Torah, their teachings, Yonah Ben Amattai is called by the voice of the Eternal to speak to the people of Ninevah, and tell the people that God knows about their crimes and wicked ways!

Jonah (Yonah in Hebrew) lives in Gath-Hepher - a small border town in the Kingdom of Israel near where will be during the time of Jesus of Nazareth Galilee.

Ninevah is a capital city in the Assyrian Empire, and in this moment, it is the Assyrians who are the military superpower feared throughout the Mediterranean. By 721 BCE, two decades after Jonah is set, the Assyrian Empire will have invaded Israel and taken much of the people into exile.

This would have happened, if not by the time that Jonah is written, certainly by the time it is compiled into the Scriptures and is read by the people, so there is significant element of dramatic tension involved.

Go to the capital of the people who are the most powerful in the world, and tell them that a God whom they don't believe in, knows they are wicked and tell them to change!

Jonah, hears the voice of the Eternal, and instead of leaving Gath-Hepher and heading due west across land to Ninevah (a completely land-bound city), he goes south to Joppa, a port city which still exists today as part of Tel-Aviv.

There, the story goes that Jonah pays for passage on a ship sailing to Tarshish which would have been on the Southern Tip of Spain. In other words, pretty much as far from Ninevah as one can travel.

Now whether there was indeed a city at Tarshish in the time of the Assyrian Empire is unknown although there certainly was one centuries later, one of the elements that makes one wonder whether Jonah is written long after the time in which its narrative is set.

Anyways, seemingly immediately at the outset of the journey, a great storm begins to assail the ship. The crew desperately try to prevent the ship being broken apart by throwing cargo over the side, during which time Jonah goes and hides in the cargo hold.

The captain of the ship finds him, asks him what he is doing at which Jonah, lacking any other plausible explanation, says that the storm has come from God because he, Jonah, refuses to go to Ninevah.

The crew, on Jonah's own suggestion, decide to throw him into the sea, as a sacrifice to Yahweh, the Eternal, in hopes to stop the storm.

The narrative does not specify whether the ship survives, but it does state that at this moment, the Eternal sends a great fish who swallows Jonah whole:

And he remained in the fish's belly for three days and three nights...

Then the text moves from narrative to poetry and readers get the Psalm or prayer of Jonah:

*'I called to the Eternal out of my distress,
and God answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.*

It goes on with Jonah's commitment to bear witness that deliverance comes from the Eternal.

At this point, the Psalm ends with the most poetic of lines:

Then the Eternal spoke to the fish, and it vomitted Jonah out upon the dry land.

At this point, Jonah is called again by the voice of the Eternal to go to Ninevah, this is where our reading from this morning begins.

Jonah goes to Ninevah, as instructed, and indeed does declare loudly and boldly:

Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!

And in a twist, unexpected to the reader, far from decrying his words and ignoring him, or worse, responding with anger and violence (as the reader might assume Jonah feared), the people of Ninevah listen.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or

flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change God's mind; God may turn from fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

And then the line which ended our reading:

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behaviour. And God relented by not inflicting on them the disaster that threatened them.

Now this is where Jonah's story, if we're open to it, becomes even more ironically humorous.

Far from being relieved that he is safe

Far from celebrating that the pre-eminent military political superpower has vowed to live justly

Jonah is furious!

Jonah cries out to God and clarifies his original refusal to come to Ninevah, and spoiler alert, it was not out of fear for himself. He was worried that Ninevah might actually repent and avoid their own destruction...

'O Eternal! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

I did not want to preach to Ninevah, because I was worried they would change their ways and avoid divine retribution!

If indeed, as the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel suggests, the Hebrew Prophets were animated by divine pathos, their ability to tap into God's sorrow at violence and injustice and thus motivated to speak challenging truth regardless of the consequences, well, Jonah sure does seem to have missed the memo.

Jonah marches out into the wilderness, but still within eyeshot of Ninevah where he sits down in a huff. Given that this story in the Lectionary has come in such proximity to the US Inauguration, some have pointed out that a parka and mitten clad Bernie Sanders, crossing arms and legs looking unimpressed is an apt analogy for Jonah's disposition.

God then causes a tree to grow and shelter Jonah which delights him, and then God causes worms to come eat the tree and then a scalding east wind and the sun beats down on Jonah's unsheltered head!

And when Jonah cries out in frustration over the loss of his tree, the voice of the Eternal responds.

Your sorrow at the loss of this tree you loved is but a dim reflection of my sorrow at the thought of the destruction of the city of Ninevah and its people!

And with that mic drop moment. The book of Jonah ends.

Many a Hebrew scholar point out that with the way that Jonah deviates from the norm of the Hebrew prophets that perhaps it is most rightly understood as a parable, like those Jesus tells in the Christian Scriptures (and it is worth remembering that Jesus, a Torah reading Jew himself, would have picked up that pedagogical style somewhere).

This accounts for the sketchy geographical and historical details.

And while Jonah's refusal to follow the call to preach to Ninevah, his flight towards Tarshish, and his consumption by the fish, are certainly the most action packed and memorable moments in the narrative, it is Jonah's complaint to the Eternal that seems to hold the deepest reflective meaning. What is it about Jonah that elicits rage and frustration when God in fact spares Ninevah?

It's a reversal of the great moment in Torah in which Abraham argues against God pleading the case to spare Sodom and Gomorrah

One of my mentors in preaching and interpretation Ched Myers suggests that Scripture is both a window and a mirror.

Scripture offers to us a glimpse into a world that is not our own, but in so doing, we can reflect on truths about our society and our own hearts.

A Hebrew hermeneutic (a word for interpretive framework) is one of critical pedagogy.

There is not a single meaning to be plucked out like a perfect pearl.

But instead, Scripture is an invitation to engage in untangling possibility and sitting with our own, individual and communal reaction and response.

How are we like the Jonah who sits arms crossed staring across the plain at the undestroyed Ninevah wishing it received its comeuppance.

Is perhaps Jonah, to some extent right and actually reflecting something of God's pathos.

While Ninevah of the narrative has committed unnamed crimes, Ninevah of history does indeed get destroyed as Assyria plays the dangerous game of Empire. Having thoroughly dominated and decimated Israel, Ninevah itself is then destroyed less than a century later by the Babylonian Army, who will fall to Rome, and so on the cycle goes...

So in this season of Epiphany

This season of vocation and call

Of attending to the possibility

Perhaps Jonah offers us not an answer but a methodology

A reminder to be attentive and curious

To ask of ourselves

What it is about that situation that makes me respond as such

To recognize that our responses are often formed by many factors

But instead of beginning with mistrust

We begin with trust that our life speaks when we attend with careful listening

That community can bring us into new possibility

And that we are not alone...