

Fourth Sunday of the Epiphany
Jan 31st, 2020
Immanuel United Church

Welcome

Call to Worship:

(Close eyes.) Sometimes we do not recognize God in the faces of those around us.

(Cover ears.) Sometimes we do not want to listen to the advice of others, or hear God's word proclaimed in the ways that might challenge us.

(Fold arms across chest and assume stubborn facial expression.) We can be stubborn, thinking we know everything and refusing to learn new ways and ideas.

(Relax, unfold arms, and hold them out, palms up) God opens us to Word and Love, moving and living in our world.

Let us celebrate God's presence and respond to God's invitation to live and act in new ways.

Prayer:

Loving God,

we thank you for the many psalms and stories that tell us of the turning of life's seasons:

joy will follow sorrow as

warming springtime follows winter

and cooling autumn follows summer.

We thank you for being with us in all the seasons of our lives,

a steady presence

bringing peace in the midst of the changes we must face.

We gladly sing praises to you, Maker of heaven and earth. Amen.

Hymn: MV 10 ***Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom***

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-5,10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them; and God did not do it.

Reflection: Procrastination? Proclamation!

My older son will be 15 years old in May (slightly older than one third of my age!). He never likes to be called a "teenager." He tells me, "I am just a kid." This kid (who has already lived the first third of the

years of my life!) recently developed new interest and passion in Japanese anime (“manga”), and told me that he would like to learn Japanese. Thankfully my friend told me he would be happy to offer Japanese tutoring for him, so his Japanese sessions took wings. However, before starting the tutoring, my friend told me to ask Peace: Why is learning Japanese important to him? What helps him learn best? What happens if learning Japanese gets too frustrating for him? My son answered: “Because like him, I am obsessed with Japanese culture. I learn best when it is interactive. When it gets too frustrating, I procrastinate.”

Today, I would like to reflect on “procrastination”. I procrastinate sometimes. My son procrastinates, sometimes. You probably procrastinate sometimes. Definitely, Jonah procrastinated about going to “Nineveh, the great city, and proclaiming God’s message” to the people there. Jonah never liked the idea of going to Nineveh to transform the ways of life of the people there by telling them God’s messages. Nineveh was a place of power. It was an ancient Assyrian city of Upper Mesopotamia, located on the outskirts of Mosul in modern-day northern Iraq on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. It was the capital and largest city of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, as well as the largest city in the world for several decades. I imagine that, to Jonah, the city of Nineveh was like the capital city of the United States would be to an Iraqi citizen today. The book of Jonah describes its scale and size as “an exceedingly large city, a three day’s walk across.” Nineveh was also an enemy’s city, famous for its social oppression. Jonah must have heard that the Syrian Empire oppressed even its own people. Jonah must have also thought to himself, “Why should I go? Why should I help them change their hearts from evil ways? For whose benefit?” In his opinion, Ninevites did not deserve to be released from calamity. We know from the rest of the Jonah story (which comes after today’s chapter) that the repentance of the Ninevites actually infuriated the prophet. Yet another reason why Jonah originally procrastinated his God-given task: When he cried out, people believed God. Jonah did not want that to happen in Nineveh.

So, Jonah ran away. He ran in the opposite direction, only to be swallowed by a big whale where he spent three days and three nights in its dark, warm belly. He absolutely procrastinated, until he was vomited out onto dry land by the tummy aching whale.

Now, standing with his two feet again on the land the Creator told him to go to, Jonah had no option other than to set out and go into the city, according to the Word of God. There he cried out God’s messages, proclaiming the impending doom of the city: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” In other words, in forty days, you’ll all be captured by your enemies or you will be dead (or whatever we imagine what ‘overthrown’ might mean.) But...

Why would anyone believe him? This sounds crazy. The Ninevites would demand evidence.

At this point, the story, again, reminds us how big, no, how huge the city was. When Jonah was proclaiming God’s messages, Jonah was about a “day’s walk” into the city, which was just one third of its inside diameter. (Remember, the whole city was “a three day’s walk across.”) Let’s take a picture of this situation. Walking across the city by one third of the straight line into it, how many Ninevites would Jonah have met or passed by? The people did indeed stop what they were doing and took heed of the words of this wandering prophet who was simply a stranger? And just within a day? Could it have been 30 percent of the total population? That would be ambitious! At least 20 %? Or even 10 %? (Experts say that when 13 % of the population turn around and reverse the way they do things, then there is a tipping point for social change.) To everyone’s surprise, verses 6 - 9 in the story, which the lectionary reading does not include so we didn’t hear today, tells that Jonah’s speech reached the king of Nineveh! The King rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Lately, I had an opportunity to hear an Indigenous Elder explain this story. She said that the missing verses noted that even the animals mourned. It was not just humanity, but the whole of creation that were mourning at the arrival of Jonah's words/teaching. Jonah named what was not ok; He proclaimed! He urged the change of hearts and the ways of life of the people in the Empire which was known to oppress not only foreigners and other countries but its own people. Surprisingly, for whatever reason, the Ninevites reckoned that Jonah's vision of their future was possible, if not accurate, and they chose to take a new direction!

For a variety of reasons and by making different excuses, we can procrastinate about important things in our lives, in the church, in the world. We might say, "See how big the city is." "See how complicated the situation is." "See what we have become - - the biggest Christian denomination in Canada through institutionalization." "We cannot move quickly because we are so big!" "The issues are so complicated" "The stakeholders are too many!"

We fear. We worry.

Our heads get hot. Our hands get cold. Our feet do not move. We yield no action.

We procrastinate.

Some of us might wonder like me, what if we are not so big? What if we can be intimate with each other? What if people are close to the voice, right close to the centre? People might respond immediately, then.

We might continue to make an excuse, complain or worry. "We are so big. We cannot change ourselves in a day."

While we procrastinate important justice issues--our neighbours in suffering, ourselves in trouble, our Earth/Climate/Ecology in danger--are still oppressed, minimized, neglected, mistreated by our own church and in the world; racialized members, Black people, Indigenous people in our church and in the world. In the world, many address hopes and despair; cheerful songs and heartbreaking laments at the same time...

However, what Jonah's story teaches us and awakens us to is that we still need to proclaim. Proclamation! No more procrastination! Even if we find ourselves being at just the third outer margin of the diameter of the situation, still far from the centre of the power, we proclaim truth, love and justice.

Even if we are just in a day's walk in the city of a three days' walk across, do not fear. Let's heed the wisdom of Ninevites and turn quickly. We will meet the companions on the way and "climb the hill" (Amanda Gorman) of truth, love and justice together.

We may be more like the earlier version of Jonah who ran away and then was saved in the big dark belly of the whale. We are still inside the belly of the Creator. Of course, everything has its time, a time for every matter under heaven.

Procrastination? Proclamation!

Be a pro at love, speaking the truth and God's transforming justice today.

Let us set out and go to the Nineveh of our time and of our life — holding hands with our companions on this journey, seeking the ways of Wisdom, even if we are still just in a day's walk, in the huge city of a three day's walk across, or even of one hundred day's walk across and more.

Procrastination? Proclamation!

Hymn: VU 649 ***Walk With Me***

Prayers of the People:

The imagination that sees in things
a shape never seen before;

**the discovery that hears a chord
in a song never heard before;**

the truth that recognizes a cry
from a voice never noticed before.

This is the work of the Spirit.

May we be filled with praise.

The vision that notices a word on the page
never understood before;

**the anger that challenges a violence
in a world never questioned before;**

the timing that starts a movement
for justice never thought important before.

This is the work of the Spirit.

May we be filled with praise.

The beauty that smells the perfume of a flower
never known before;

**the throat that speaks the name of the silenced
never named before;**

the pain that voices the hurt of the past
never acknowledged before.

This is the work of the Spirit.

May we be filled with praise.

Hymn: MV 90 **Don't Be Afraid** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDscgGY4X40VI>

Benediction:

Let us leave this place

knowing that wherever we go,

God is there, at home in the whole creation.

May the blessing of God -

**creator, redeemer, and sustainer -
be with us in all the places of our lives,
this day and always. Amen.**

Hymn: VU 808 **On Eagle's Wings** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y22IG4Z49Lo>