

When they actually listen (Jonah 3:1-5, 10)

There's something that's even stranger than being a prophet.

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To be a prophet is a heavy, strange, miraculous calling. To be a prophet who is listened to is something stranger still. The typical prophet—if we may speak of such a thing—is a witness against futility. They are ignored, mocked, beaten, even killed. Isaiah is paradoxically commissioned to conceal the truth in the act of proclaiming it.

Jonah's story has an unforgettable prologue, from his flight from God to the storm at sea, the casting of lots and the whale, and the hymn from the belly of the whale. And it has a cinematic, if ambiguous, denouement with the gourd vine and the bitter dialogue between prophet and God.

It's easy, between those chapters, to see the story of Jonah's actual prophetic activity as something of an afterthought. Three days Jonah walks, mirroring the three days in the whale, all the while proclaiming a message of fast-approaching doom. It is not friendly territory for an Israelite, especially not one who is sharing such bad news.

But remarkably, the king and people of Nineveh listen. They fast, they put on sackcloth, they promise to turn from their evil ways. There are not many scripts for this. Jonah wasn't given any message of hope in the event that the city believes him

and acts accordingly.

“What if people believe this stuff?” is not always an easy question to ask or to answer. In a world of narrow horizons, and especially in a church culture that can feel besieged by indifference, fatalism, or nostalgia (fatalism and nostalgia being two variations of the same hopelessness), making allowance for the possibility of a breakthrough takes a discipline of its own.

Nineveh is not quite as lost as Jonah has reason to believe, or as his own God-ordained message implies. The story begins and ends with Jonah, whose initial refusal turns into bold trust before curdling into resentment and becoming an object lesson in the true meaning of trust. But Nineveh is there, too—an imperial center with its own internal agonies, its own furtive awareness of its misdeeds, its own willingness to surrender something, if only for the sake of survival.

That’s a miracle of its own. And as we hear the startling conclusion of Jonah’s story, we might imagine what the following days are like in Nineveh. Does the repentance take root and effect deeper change? Does the passage of time make Jonah seem less like a dread oracle and more like an eccentric migrant from the hinterlands, whose message somehow rattled the nerves of the great king?

But before anything else, there is the simple fact of a message reluctantly preached and yet received, startlingly, in earnest. While few are called to be prophets, it’s a practice of faith to imagine what it would be like for a word to be believed—just in case it is.