

Overthrown

Third in a series of four sermons on Jonah

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Text: Jonah 3

So Jonah went to the great city of Nineveh. The story tells us the city took three days to go through. Archeologists of the ancient city of Nineveh in modern day Mosul, tell us that the city walls were 12 kilometers around. An estimated 100,000 people lived there, making it one of the biggest human settlements in the world at that time. It could easily have taken three days for one man to deliver a message to the hearing of everyone in the city.

The message that Jonah gives is the message given to him by God; “Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Overthrown is the English translation of the Hebrew word *hapak*. *Hapak* can be translated in a number of ways, depending on the context. We see this Hebrew word used in Genesis 19: Sodom & Gomorrah were *hapak*.... were overthrown. In that context it is sometimes translated as “destroyed”.

Yet in I Samuel 10, when Samuel anoints Saul as the King of Israel he tells Saul “The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power, and you will *hapak* into a different person... God hapaked Saul’s heart.” You will be overthrown into a different person, God overthrew Saul’s heart. Some of your Bibles translate this *hapak* here as change: “God changed Saul’s heart.” Or Jeremiah 31, “I will *hapak* their mourning into gladness,” I will change or turn their mourning into gladness.

So the Hebrew word *hapak* means wholesale, complete, sudden change, either for worse (destruction) or for good (conversion). The Ninevites obviously understand the threat of *hapak*, they obviously feared destruction. But when God says he will *hapak* them, there is a possibility it means something positive. God may change them for good. That is what they are hoping for.

The story tells us that the people and the government of Nineveh DO repent. All the people, the King included, show signs of their willingness to change. The people tell the king, and the king then makes a decree that everyone should fast. Everyone should put on rough clothing, made of sackcloth (which is like burlap), as a way of humbling themselves. And everyone should give up evil ways and violence.

Looking at the king and his actions, it’s obvious that *hapak* is happening. The king instead of sitting on a throne in royal clothes, is sitting in the dust in burlap. Instead of dining on delicacies, he is fasting. And instead of invading countries and committing brutalities he is giving up violence.

This chapter tells a remarkable story, a story that would have overthrown Jonah and any Jewish reader that heard it. This is Nineveh, the capital city of Israel's arch enemy, the evil empire of the world. Hearing a few words about the true God, and turning in repentance, how could this be?! Is it possible? God sent many prophets to Israel, and we see in our Bible all the words they spoke, and yet Israel persisted in its evil ways!!!

Israel's stubbornness and Nineveh's willingness to repent is something Jesus himself comments on. In Luke 11 the scribes and Pharisees are asking for a sign and Jesus says, "The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here." He holds up Nineveh as a model for repenting, a model for Israel, God's chosen people!

It's as if God would say to Israel today, look at the faithfulness of Gaza, model yourselves on them. It's not a very welcome comparison.

The story of Jonah in scripture is a story about wholesale repentance even by the worst of the worst. Jonah means dove. Jonah brings a message of hope even to Nineveh. I wonder how this book brings a message of hope to us.

Wholesale change is sometimes what we need. If you have seen wholesale change, if you have seen God *hapak* someone's life, then you know how dramatic this can be. Sometimes it doesn't take many words. I was with someone when God *hapaked* their heart. It wasn't anything I said, I was just there to witness it. It was just a sudden shift in thinking, a sudden realization, a moment of clarity, and they were...overthrown! This person had spent years putting up defenses, so they wouldn't have to face the destructiveness of their own actions. And suddenly in an hour, all the defenses just fell away, and the person crumbled. Their past was laid open to them, and they saw with new clear eyes the trail of destruction behind them and in them, and all they could do was weep and say sorry. That's where the prayer, "God have mercy on me a sinner!" is very useful.

Personal repentance is necessary and important. And it may be God is sending a prophet to *hapak* your personal life, to reveal to you the way God wants to change you. But only reading Jonah at the level of personal repentance does a disservice to this book. God's message was to the city of Nineveh. Are cities or countries or organizations in need of repentance today? If they are, how realistic is it to think that wholesale repentance can happen?

I read recently about a corporation that was *hapaked*, overthrown. It started with one man. His name was Ray Andersen, the founder and CEO of a huge multi-national corporation called Interface, one of the leading manufacturers in the world of modular floor coverings. Ray was a very successful CEO of a very successful company, and he had been doing this for a couple of decades. He had two goals from day one, which were to grow the company and to make money. And he did just that.

One day he found a book on his desk and he had no idea what the book was about or who had put it there. It happened to be “The Ecology of Commerce” by Paul Hawken. He flipped it open, and randomly started reading. He read ten pages, and Ray describes what happened. He said, “It was a like a spear to my chest.” The pages he read said that corporations are plundering the earth and taking what is not theirs, spoiling the earth for future generations. He realized that the book was talking about him—he was one of those people. He was plundering the earth, taking what wasn’t his and he realized he had to stop. He was *hapaked*.

From that moment on he devoted himself to revolutionizing his company. He set out to make his company, Interface, the first name in industrial ecology, not just in name but in actions. He committed his company to the steps of reduce, reuse, reclaim, recycle and redesign to make things more ecologically friendly. He became devoted to developing sustainable business practices, the best practices, and to advance and share them with other companies. He aimed as much as possible for zero scrap into landfills and zero emissions. For Ray Anderson, after reading ten pages, decades of destructive patterns of behaviour were overthrown and a new direction was set.

Ray was one person, but he was an influential person, who used his power as CEO to persuade and encourage his whole corporation to *hapak* along with him. No doubt there were some that were not on the *hapak* trail, and they left the company. Others would have joined precisely because the corporation was taking a new, innovative, more sustainable approach. A whole corporation that had a *hapak* experience, just like Nineveh.

The book of Jonah suggests that wholesale change of groups of people is possible. As I studied this book of Jonah, I found out that once a year parts of the Christian church, the parts centred in Iraq and the middle East, (the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox church and the Ukrainian Catholic church)—all have special services where they observe “the Fast of Nineveh”. They remember Nineveh’s repentance, and they celebrate God’s mercy. These churches hold three days of fasting, to encourage repentance as a church, to be *hapaked* as Nineveh was *hapaked*.

I think that would be a useful event in the church calendar. The assumption of celebrating the Fast of Nineveh is that God still has words for us that can overthrow us. God still sends prophets, maybe even to Edmonton. Some people say one prophet’s name is David Suzuki; he’s speaking in Edmonton on Tuesday. His message could be summed up by saying, “Forty years and the arctic will be overthrown.” If you have been keeping up with debate on climate change, you will know the meaning of that, and its implications. Perhaps when you think of the polar ice caps disappearing, you get a dull thud of despair in the pit of your stomach. You think of polar bears and penguins disappearing. You think of the effect this will have on sea levels and vulnerable people who live at sea level. Or you think of glaciers and icefields on high mountains disappearing, and what that will do to the ecosystems that depend on that water. Whole countries of people are dependent on the water from mountains. Prophets (scientists and environmentalists) are showing us the pit

we've dug for ourselves. The cumulative effects of pollution and consumption of fossil fuels has changed our climate. Scientists have no idea how to fix or reverse the damage we've done. We are only beginning to glimpse the state of the bed that we have made for future generations to lie in.

People are repenting of this. Everyday people, wondering how to reduce their own ecological footprint. Corporations, like Ray Anderson's corporation, trying to change. Governments struggling to set policies to reduce carbon emissions without totally tanking their economy. Phrases like "carbon footprint" and "carbon offsets" have become part of our modern vocabulary. I think so often it is a younger generation that is willing to hear this challenge, to be *hapaked* by a prophetic word from God.

That is one example of how groups of people need to be overthrown. There are lots of other ways. Many people here followed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission closely that happened here in Edmonton. Our aboriginal brothers and sisters reminded us how Canada needs to re-think its relationship with First Nations and change its actions to reflect a new way of thinking.

Or maybe there are other prophets that you have heard, other ways that you see God working in the world to overturn evil systems. This week so many of us were touched by the attack on Parliament and the murder of Canadian soldiers. Since that happened, Canadians have been grappling with what it means. Do we need to change, and how do we need to change? "Where is God in this picture?" I asked myself.

For me it came from an article I read that described the reactions of the bystanders who were there when the soldier Nathan Cirillo was gunned down at point blank range in front of the war memorial in Ottawa. The people around Mr. Cirillo him sprang into action, trying to save his life, trying to stop the bleeding, trying to get him breathing, trying to keep his heart pumping. And the whole time they were saying encouraging words to him, "You are a good man, a brave man. You are loved. Your family loves you. All the people here we're working so hard for you. Everybody loves you." He was a stranger to them, but this is what they said. He died in their arms.

We have heard many stories this week about this event, told by many storytellers. A story of terrorism, a story of the need for more surveillance, more suspicion, more guns. And a story of love of strangers for one another. Which story will *hapak* our hearts as a society?

Jesus came to tell stories that would change us. He reminded us of Nineveh. Even reluctant prophets like Jonah can bring about change greater than they can imagine. This week, you will hear stories from many different people. Which story will you listen to? I pray that together as a community here at Lendrum, we will listen to the story of love, for each other, for our enemies, for our planet. I think that's the story the Holy Spirit is whispering in our ear, each and every day.