

Sermon Notes – January 21, 2018
“Warning, Warning”
Brian Walton

Warning! Warning! Warnings abound in this morning’s scriptures. Warnings about cataclysmic events. Warnings that life will be forever changed. The first warning is found in the ancient Biblical tale of Jonah. Jonah is a reluctant prophet. When God selects him to deliver a message of doom to the city of Nineveh he takes a boat in the opposite direction. Tossed about in a storm, Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by the whale. Eventually he is burped up close to Nineveh. Resigned to the reality that he has been chosen to pronounce the destruction of the city, he walks into its centre and declares Warning! Warning! “within forty days the great city of Nineveh will be overthrown.”

<slide of Nineveh warning>

There is another kind of warning in the brief excerpt from St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. The early Christian community believed that Jesus – whom they had known and loved, who was crucified and risen, who promised the Holy Spirit – was to return – soon! In the years following Jesus death early Christians believed that he would return to transform corruption to commonwealth and base existence to spiritual nirvana. As a result, Paul issues a warning. Don’t invest in your earthly commitments, don’t obsess about your possessions, don’t even get caught up in feelings of sadness or joy. Life is about to change. Warning! Warning! He declares, “For the present form of this world is passing away.”

<slide of present world warning>

It was ironic to discover that these were the appointed readings just one week after the world read the warning: “Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii.”

<slide of ballistic missile> Our lives are filled with warnings. I recently read that,

the much publicized astro-physicist, Stephen Hawking declared that within 100 years the earth will no longer be inhabitable. Warning! Warning! <slide of Hawking's warning> Hawking predicts that overpopulation is leading to overconsumption producing the infamous greenhouse gases. He suggests that the earth will become like Venus – with an atmosphere so hot that water vapourizes off the planet.

I recall the morning that my mother was visiting in Saskatoon. A committed early-riser, she hadn't risen by the time I was leaving for work. I couldn't wake her, so I called the ambulance. Her oxygen levels were so low that she could not engage her brain. Her pack-a-day smoking career had caught up with her. During her hospitalization, the specialist came into her room and explained she would be hooked to oxygen for life and added, Warning! Warning! <slide of smoking warning > "if you continue to smoke you will surely die".

What do we do in the face of life's warnings? How do we respond? Does our faith or spirituality shape our response? Is there wisdom to be found in the pages of scripture? <move to black slide>

A majority of scientists support and endorse global warning, even if they don't agree with the specific prediction of Hawking. The earth is warming, weather is changing, life will be altered. Yet, there are plenty of naysayers – a respondent to Hawking's blog wrote:

"Another BS article about faux science ... it's all computer models. The same kind of thing that predicts weather, only less accurate. Calm down Stevie! Everything will be just fine."

It was interesting to listen to CBC interviews with Canadians who experienced the Hawaii alert. In the first interview, a distraught father explained

how he and his wife desperately phoned home to hear the voice of their children. Another couple appeared stoic, resorting to dark humour and choosing to make a final cup of coffee. A third reported that they were having a cocktail on the beach (at 8 in the morning) and simply decided to order another round.

It does not appear that the early Christian community embraced Paul's warning with much intent. People still married and continued to live normal lives. Successive generations of Christians have had to rethink the concept of Jesus' second coming.

Finally, we return to Nineveh. Scholars call Jonah the most reluctant of all prophets. His warning was exceedingly modest – he offers only one sentence: “Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The response of the population is nothing short of miraculous. The entire country acknowledges its failures - from the ruling class to the common person, they repent and apologize. God relents. Tragedy is averted.

My mother was scared. She heeded the doctor's warning. Although she never relinquished her oxygen tank, her lungs significantly improved and her oxygen saturation returned to normal.

What do you do when faced with a dire warning? Why did the Ninevites, and my mother, respond so swiftly while the early Christians didn't really change their lives and few of us respond seriously to Hawkings warnings. I imagine many factors affect our response. My mother's threat was immediate and abandoning cigarettes was the only obvious option. I believe global warming is real yet, my modest efforts at recycling and owning an efficient furnace don't reflect much commitment. What shapes our response to warnings?

To some extent our personality traits kick in. Those in Hawaii are a sampling – the stoic has a final coffee; the doubter orders another beer; and the realist phones home. If there a particular Christian response? Probably not, Christians are simply people with a perspective. We have stoics, doubters and realists in our midst. We have optimists and pessimists in our midst. Yet, today's scriptures point to characteristics consistent with the God-power. Perhaps there is a "Christian response" in the midst of crisis.

The first characteristic is hope. It turns out there was hope for Nineveh. In the story, God's love overtakes anger. Later in the story Jonah gets annoyed and says to God, "I knew you would do that, it's just your nature to forgive." Hope is a characteristic of the Christian life – not a naïve hope that all will be well, but a hope that if we work in concert with the God-power, life can change. When my mother was honest with herself she found the will to change. There are many scientists who, while sharing the urgency of Hawkings, remain hopeful in new technologies and the human spirit. Here at St. Martin's our property committee is considering the use solar panels on the roof to generate and share power.

Few people have been more challenged to be hopeful then Nelson Mandela, jailed as he was for decades. Yet he was able to write: **<display slide of Mandella quote>**

I am fundamentally an optimist. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way leads (only) to defeat and death. **<move to black slide>**

The second lesson that comes from this morning's scripture is love. Love is the very essence of the God-power. God's love converted the Nineveh warning from tragedy to hope. Love is the core component of the Christian life. The parents who phoned home from Hawaii to hear the voice of their children were moved by love. Even the couple who decided to share a final coffee together were moved by love. CNN produced a short video of some of the text messages emanating from Hawaiian cell phones. Of the twenty messages they captured, nineteen of them contained the words, "I love you." What would happen to war, and rumours of war, if each morning political leaders repeated the mantra, "love your enemy."

And finally, this morning's passage reveals perseverance. Despite his attempts to flee from responsibility God compelled Jonah to persevere. There was no option in God's mind but to "keep on keeping on," trying to convert the aggression of Assyria. Although the 'second coming' never arrived as the early Christians imagined, commitment to the gospel has been consistent for over 2100 years. Even **our** little band of believers remain committed to the way of Jesus despite the forces of secularism. This same perseverance is required in the pursuit of peace and environmental sustainability.

St. Paul concludes, "for the present form of this world is passing away." It has always been true. Yet, when we live within the God-power, crisis and opportunity are not so far apart. Might hope, Love and perseverance continue to inform our living. Amen.