

2026-05-17 Jonah, Elijah and John the Baptizer – Unfinished... but still used by God Pastor Lois Harder

Thank you, Karl! That was a lot! We've got three characters to unpack here this morning and they all have something in common; Richard Rohr says they're "unfinished prophets". Let's see what he means by that.

We'll begin with Jonah. You remember Jonah, right? The entire book in the Bible named after him is only 4 chapters long. The brief introductory piece that Karl read summed it up pretty nicely, but let me just put a little more meat on the bones of it – to jog your memory a bit.

Jonah did NOT want to be a prophet so badly that he literally ran in the opposite direction of what God was asking him to do and where God was asking him to go. Jonah got on a ship, got thrown overboard, got swallowed by a giant fish and then "rescued" by the fish vomiting him up, onto the shore – at which point Jonah finally agreed to go prophesy to the nasty people of Nineveh. As it turns out, they listened to him! They repented. They fasted and mourned. And the king mourned and sat in sack-cloth and ashes and made a decree that all living beings were to repent. He reasoned that maybe Jonah's God would see their repentance and decide to have mercy on them.

And that is indeed what happened. And Jonah was mad! Here's the end of the story: "Jonah thought it was utterly wrong (for God not to destroy Nineveh) and he became angry. He prayed... 'Come on, Lord! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, Lord, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live.' The Lord responded, 'Is your anger a good thing?' But Jonah went out from the city and sat down... he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city.

Then the Lord God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from utter misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. But God provided a worm the next day... that attacked the shrub and it died. Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying 'It's better for me to die than to live.'

God said to Jonah, 'Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?' Jonah said, 'Yes, my anger is good – even to the point of death!'

But the Lord said, 'You 'pitied' the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left...?'

Jonah was mad. He was mad at the beginning of the story about what God was asking him to do because he didn't like the Ninevites to begin with; they were wicked people. And at the end of the story Jonah was mad about God's grace and forgiveness! And when God questioned him, asking whether his anger was "a good thing", Jonah claimed it and clung to it tightly, claiming that it was a good thing.

Richard Rohr says, “Jonah was so detached from his own real message that he was disappointed when it succeeded!” Jonah was unable to move beyond what Rohr calls a dualistic reward-punishment worldview. For Jonah people were either good or bad. Obedient or disobedient. Worthy or unworthy. And these Ninevites... well, they were clearly bad. They were part of the huge Assyrian Empire and they had made life really difficult for Jonah and his people. So when God decided to honor the Ninevites’ repentance, Jonah was incensed. He wanted God to take them down! “His world of predictable good guys and always-bad guys collapsed into God’s unfathomable grace.”

In spite of his recalcitrant attitude, Jonah is one of Rohr’s favorite Biblical prophets. He writes, “I love this story so much that I have collected images of a man in the belly of the whale for much of my adult life.” (Who knew there were even such images to collect?) He goes on in sort of a confessional way, “I think I live in that whale’s belly permanently, with loads of unresolved questions and painful paradoxes... Yet God is always ‘vomiting’ me up in the right place – in the complete opposite direction that I’ve been trying to run. The story of Jonah breaks all the expectations of who is right, and then remakes those expectations in favor of grace.”

Jonah thought he had the exclusive corner on the market of truth and so was justified in despising those he was preaching to. He wanted them to be wrong, so that he could be right. But in his anger at the Ninevites and the entire Assyrian Empire, Jonah couldn’t abide God’s deep desire to offer forgiveness and grace. He resented them and could not let go of his anger enough to imagine them as repentant and forgiven. It was particularly galling to Jonah that the enemy Ninevites genuinely repented and turned around when his own people, the Israelites refused to do so.

Rohr writes that “we must not be discouraged when people say, *You are making the message political and not spiritual!* The prophets speak about misuse of power, but always from an inspired basis, and at a higher level of morality.” I think what he means by this is that when people of faith call out leaders for their misuse of power, that always has to be done out of love – even in the midst of justified anger. Rohr references “Martin Luther King, Jr. and his crusade for civil rights, Catherine of Sienna’s advocacy for reform of the clergy and peacemaking, Sojourner Truth’s activism for the abolition of slavery and civil rights for African Americans and women, Cesar Chavez’s work in organizing farmworkers. Their critiques and promises were stated in concrete historical terms, but with a clear spiritual meaning and motivation. Their messages were received gladly by the powerless and then exploited or rejected by prideful profiteers and narrow nationalists... True prophets are always internationalists working to realize what Jesus will call the ‘kingdom of God’. In their “political” advocacy, (prophets) point out and confront the power” inequalities. But the mature prophets don’t stand in a dualistic, right or wrong, cut or dried partisan space. They often begin with anger, but as they evolve and mature, they end up in the tears of compassion – like God.

Rohr encourages us to ask these testing questions about prophets: What are their foundational sources? What is the final goal of their moral or political position? Are they lost in rage, or do they have any space between themselves and their message? Are they overidentified with the

truth or absoluteness of their own opinions? These questions can help us to discern whether a prophet is a strongly opinionated zealot or one who is doing God's work and not just their own.

Now let's turn briefly to Elijah and John the Baptist. We don't know whether Elijah ever wrote anything, but we don't have any evidence of his writing in the Bible anyway! We only have stories that were written about him. In the passages that Karl read for us, we learn that whatever else Elijah might have been, he was a violent man who also saw things in dualistic ways – good or bad, right or wrong. Also like Jonah, Elijah had no patience for those he was convinced were wrong. He had little capacity for the tears of compassion. So he called for a showdown with the 450 prophets of Baal. When they couldn't call fire from the sky, Elijah, in his rage, called on God and the fire appeared.

Elijah made sure that all 450 of the prophets of Baal were dead by the time this event was over. He was full of anger and that anger was his inspiration. Richard Rohr writes that “Prophets who lead... with their rage have only half of the message. They have the anger but lack the compassion.” They often become known as prophets because people confuse firebrands... zealots and ideologues for those who possess deeper truth... In our times, it's common to confuse passion with prophecy when it's often simply untransformed anger that will not change anything in the long term or lead us anywhere good. Passion and prophecy are not the same thing...”

At this point Rohr offers a few more test questions: “Who is doing the speaking and why? Is the message calling forth the fruits of the Spirit or just righteousness? Does the energy of the prophet point radically to the divine or stop with the pyrotechnics and oratory of the prophet him or herself? Elijah loved to call down fire from heaven and awe the crowd but ultimately his actions lead to murder... a true prophet leaves the success of the message to God. Their job is to speak the truth and let go of the consequences.” Nevertheless, the stories of Elijah are in the Bible. God used him in spite of his being “unfinished”.

John the Baptist was the voice in the wilderness preparing the way for Jesus. But it's interesting that he is also referred to a couple of times in the same scenario and the same prophetic style as Elijah. They both led with their rage. Rohr writes this about John the Baptist: “He enjoyed being a superior and judgmental outsider far too much. That's something we all must watch for in ourselves. In the Gospels, (John) is portrayed as an ascetic and a firm moralist, preoccupied with purity and others' sins. He calls others a ‘brood of vipers’, no better than rocks, and seemed rather gleeful when he threatened them with ‘a fire that will never go out’... John did not yet know the language of healing, forgiveness, and grace that we find in Jesus and the mature prophets... And yet, Jesus still honors John as a good and humble truth-teller who points forward and beyond himself.”

As I read about these “unfinished prophets” I couldn't help but reflect on the years that we lived in Tempe, AZ. It was the early 90's and I was an elementary school music teacher. The back door of my classroom opened right out into the orange groves where hundreds of undocumented Central Americans picked oranges. Some of them were parents and other relatives of some of my students. They brought me homemade tamales and other delicacies. In those days I was an outspoken advocate for these immigrants who worked so hard and had traveled so far looking for

safety and the American dream. I worked with a community organization and we tried to provide safe housing, transportation and basic necessities for the children. But the organization I worked with didn't necessarily include a spiritual or religious element. And as the months passed and the work became more and more demanding and difficult, I became resentful and angry. I recognize now that I was sort of an "unfinished prophet" too. It's not that God wasn't using us in the advocacy work we were doing. It's that we weren't necessarily grounded in God's love and grace as we did the work. At the end of our four years of living and working there I was exhausted, angry and spent. I had nothing left to give and it took me several months after we'd moved to Camp Friedenswald in southern Michigan to recover and regain my faith grounding. I needed to remember that it was God who called me to advocate for "the least of these" – I could not do it out of my own strength and rage. My own righteous indignation wasn't enough.

After that, I learned that I needed to work within organizations and with people who were clear that our motivation was to share the Love and Mercy of God. Whatever else happened was up to God.

I'd like to draw your attention to this piece of artwork hanging here on the front of the pulpit. It's called "For God So Loved the World" and the original piece is done in needlepoint by a woman named Liz Wenger. Liz did not have the use of her hands, so she did her artwork with her feet and her teeth. I don't know how well you can see it, but this is an image of God hugging the earth. And as I read the end of this chapter, I was reminded of this artwork.

As Rohr finishes his reflections on the "unfinished, immature prophets" he writes this:

God does not love any of us because we are good.

God loves us because God is good.

God does not love Israel – or any other group – because it is faithful and true. It never is!

God loves Israel (and everyone else) because God is faithful and true.

God loves us because God made us, not because we are right.

Thanks be to God!

Benediction – As you go from this place in whatever "unfinished" state you are in, remember that God made you and God loves you. May you be given the grace to evolve into God's merciful tears of compassion. Amen.