

Life of Pi is a Booker prize winning novel by Canadian writer Yann Martel, and an Oscar winning film directed by Ang Lee. The story is imaginative, and emotionally compelling. The film's cinematography and special effects are gripping. I highly recommend it!

The storyteller considers it a parable about his search for God. The story centres on a teenaged boy, Pi Patel, adrift in a 26 foot life boat in the Pacific Ocean. Pi is the sole human survivor of a shipwreck that took the lives of his family and their zoo animals. Together they were en route from India to a new life in Canada. The boy quickly discovers that he is sharing the small life boat with the magnificent but terrifying 450 pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. And their struggle to survive takes a complicated twist. The relationship cannot be taken for granted, to say the least.

Finding a solution to coexist with the tiger, Richard Parker, in his lifeboat, wasn't easy for Pi. The instinctive struggle for survival was intense. Pi discovered: "Hunger can change everything you ever thought you knew about yourself." In the end, as they both grew weaker and weaker, Pi came to understand that it was all about the self-giving, sacrificial, agape love that St Paul described to the conflicted Corinthians.

Pi found a way to share rainwater – that most precious commodity for his own survival – with the tiger. Pi learned to fish, in order to feed Richard Parker. He said to the tiger "if we are going to live together, we have to learn to communicate." And ultimately, Pi chose to rescue Richard Parker in a storm rather than secure his own life and place in the lifeboat. Later, Pi would reflect that "without Richard Parker I would have died. Tending to his needs gives my life purpose. Knowing he was here with me would give me peace." On the brink of starvation and dehydration, Pi cradles the tiger's

head on his lap, stroking him, and saying to him, “We’re dying Richard Parker. We’re dying.”

I don’t want to reveal how this desperate situation resolves, except to say that amazing grace plays a part. But Pi does come to realize that he wouldn’t have survived without Richard Parker. “I wasn’t alone out there” he says. “Richard Parker was with me.” Years later, as he tells the story, he grieves the moment when “his fierce companion, the terrible one who kept me alive, disappeared forever from my life.”

The question that the story puts before us is this: Who is that fierce companion who keeps us alive - but who we have to fight, to wrestle with, to keep from devouring us? with whom we must learn to communicate? Is it God? Is it our shadow, or id? our animal self?

Let’s keep Pi and Richard Parker in mind as we look at Luke’s account of Jesus’ return to his home town of Nazareth – the place where he was brought up, and nourished, but where he no longer makes his home.

Jesus went to the synagogue and read from the book of the prophet Isaiah – words about being anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, sight for the blind, freedom for the downtrodden; and to announce God’s hoped for Jubilee. And then Jesus gave the shortest and most breathtaking of all sermons: “today these words have been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Suddenly, a match is struck in the messianic soaked hopes and fears of his hearers. It’s as if a Bengal tiger’s magnificent head suddenly appears like a wildfire, from under the cover of the lifeboat, demanding an immediate, instinctive, adrenalin fueled response.

As Luke's story unfolds, we hear a striking reminder, a foreshadowing, of how the gospel ends - with violent rejection, Jesus' execution, and resurrection. The crucifixion is a paradox we find as difficult to understand and accept as the earliest followers of Jesus did. And yet it is a pattern we hear throughout scripture – that human beings reject the Holy One.

While Luke describes the villagers' first response as amazement at the words of grace that came from Jesus' mouth, they immediately ask "Is not this Joseph's son? I wonder what their tone of voice was. Can we recognize here that familiar strategy we use to deflect and avoid what makes us uncomfortable? Perhaps especially, when it is the divine presence knocking at the door, inviting us to respond.

In Matthew's and Mark's accounts, the story notes at this point that they were offended by him - threatened, by the otherness, the sudden unfamiliarity of this hometown boy. In Luke's gospel, Jesus stirs the pot, provoking them. And the issue he raises is about outsiders: about that urban centre Capernaum where Jesus now lives among the Romans and other Gentiles - those people that the Nazareth synagogue congregation take pride in despising. Jesus pushes their buttons when he says: "In truth I tell you – God chose the ones outside Israel to show grace to." Clearly and firmly, Jesus is critiquing their assumptions of entitlement as a chosen people, when he tells them that the blessings of God are for all, even those they are bothered, inconvenienced and threatened by.

It's the word that those who would build a wall along the border with Mexico, or build any wall, need to hear. It's the word that yellow vested protestors here, and around the world, who do not want any more

immigrants, and who demonize Muslims, need to hear. And it's the word to which colonizing nations, like our own, are chronically deaf.

It is the prophetic word that Jeremiah describes when he says: "The word of the Lord came to me saying: you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you...I have put my words in your mouth. I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Jesus spoke such a word to his hometown neighbours. And they were filled with rage: a mob possessed, fighting to defend their privileged life. And around the world today, this struggle continues to be played out.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon on today's gospel, describes a cozy church retreat, where participants were invited to share an example of some one who had been Christ for them in their life. Beautiful stories were shared, until one person stood up and said that the first thing that had come to her mind was to wonder "who in my life has told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill them for it?"

The preacher went on to say: "She burst our bubble, but she was onto something vitally important that most of us would be glad to forget: namely that the Christ is not only the one who comforts and rescues us. The Christ is also the one who challenges and upsets us, telling us the truth so clearly that we will do appalling things to make him shut up..."

And those in the synagogue rose up and cast him out (like a demon) and led him to the brow of the hill. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Barbara Brown Taylor asks: “How did he do that? I do not know, but that is how it still works. If we will not listen, he won’t try to change our minds. He will pass right through our midst and go away.” (Home by another way p. 42-3, 46)

*The question is: Do **we want Jesus to stay** with us?

Can we learn to communicate with the Bengal tiger in our lifeboat?

Can we expand our capacity for self-giving, sacrificial love?

Last week I heard Mennonite peace activist Karen Ridd speak at TRU about compassionate listening as a part of peacemaking in Israel and Palestine. Compassionate listening involves the willingness to simply listen, silently, and not to argue or present a different view. Compassionate listening is to give our attention to the person with whom we disagree; to give them the space to speak and be heard without interruption. This is self-giving, sacrificial love. And it isn’t easy.

This week, I heard the CBC Ideas podcast of Doug White’s keynote address at the Vancouver Island University’s Indigenous Speakers series, titled: “Re-imagining reconciliation and the future of Canada”. Doug White believes that the fundamental value missing in our conversation about reconciliation is love. The vision is not learning to tolerate each other. The vision is of our capacity as human beings to create caring and love between us as sisters and brothers. It is a beautiful vision.

Our cathedral community seeks to follow Christ, and be joyful, rooted, hospitable and responsive. The challenges we face give us the opportunity to

listen compassionately to one another, in love. Challenges give us the opportunity to enlarge our capacity to imagine and develop better ways of offering our ministry as Christ's body in love. Together, we are looking for sustainable ways to serve 'the other' outside our walls. Together we are learning to appreciate the Bengal tiger we discover in our lifeboat, and to share what resources we have sacrificially. We will be surprised again and again, by grace.

Beloved author and pastor Jan Richardson has a blessing for our encounters with tigers, the tigers within and the tigers without.

It's titled "Blessing that undoes us"

On the day
you are wearing
your certainty
like a cloak
and your sureness
goes before you
like a shield
or like a sword,

may the sound
of God's name
spill from your lips
as you have never
heard it before.

May your knowing
be undone.

May mystery
confound your
understanding.

...

May there come
one searing word –
enough to bare you
to the bone,
enough to set
your heart ablaze,
enough to make you
whole again.

Amen.