

Sermon: Jaffa May 19, 2019 Easter 5 Text: Acts 11:1-18 Rev. Steve Clifton
Rideau Park United Church. Ottawa, ON



Five years ago in May a group from Rideau Park was in the Holy Land, visiting Israel and Jordan. And after a 13 hour flight from Toronto to Tel Aviv, our first stop was to visit the city of Joppa, or Jaffa (Like the orange) or Yofa. Ben Gurion airport is about 16 km from Jaffa, making it a good first destination for a bunch of jet lagged pilgrims.



Until the 20th century, Jaffa was the only real point of entry into Israel from the sea. For several millennia, Jaffa was *the* port city of Israel.

It's famous in its history for several things. Napoleon brought his Army to Jaffa on his campaign to the Middle East. That did not end well.

And for Jewish Europeans in the late 19th and early 20th C, pursuing the Zionist dream of a land where they could freely and fully live as Jews, Jaffa was their port of entry, their first footsteps in their Holy Land fell here.



Now days, Jaffa is an ancient suburb to modern Tel Aviv. The very old port and the very new city sit side by side on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

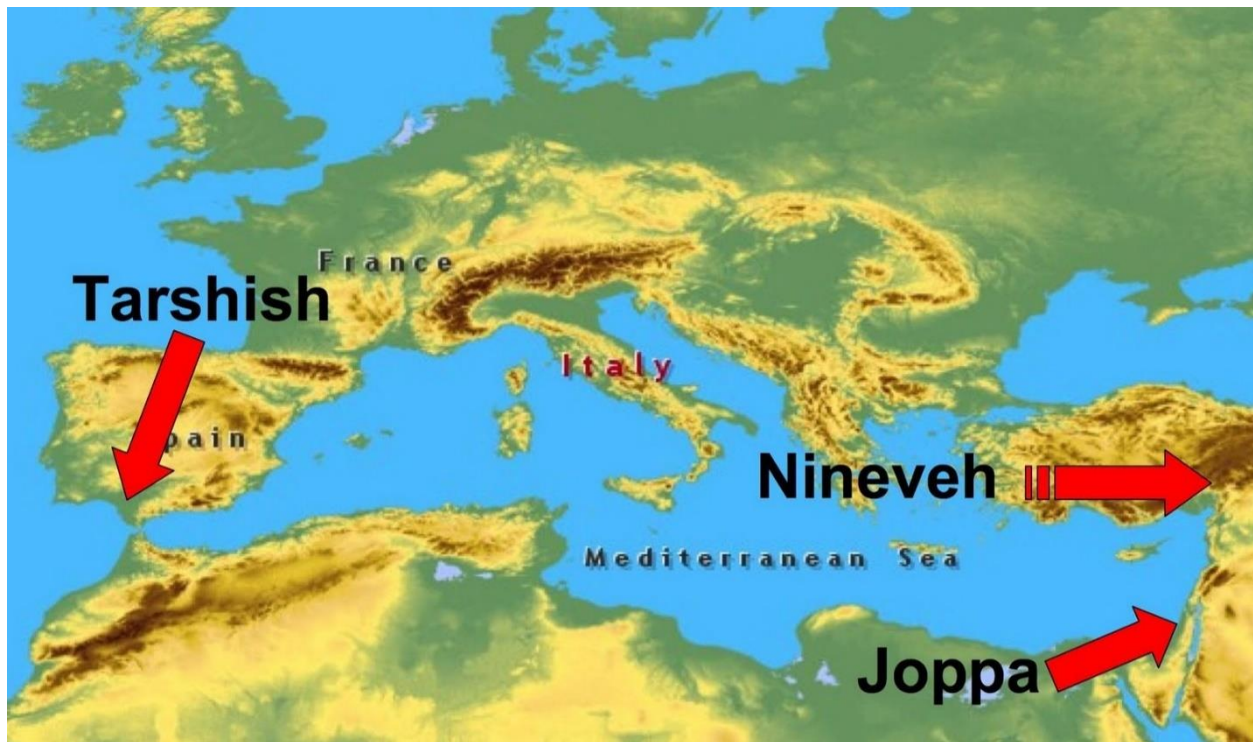
In Biblical history Jaffa appears in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament.

There are two big Biblical figures for whom Jaffa is a prominent place. Jaffa is the in the Jonah story. And Jaffa is visited by Simon Peter after Easter.



First Jonah.... You remember the story. Our children acted and sang and danced it for us in March.

Jonah was ordered by God to go to Jaffa. From there he was to sail to Nineveh and was to call the people there to repent. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire and they were a very hard and militaristic people, not loved by Jonah or his people. And Jonah did not want to go, not just because they were hated enemies but also because he feared that those terrible Ninevites might repent and that God might forgive them. Jonah wanted the Ninevites to stay in God's bad books. He wanted them to maintain their place as unclean, unworthy, outsiders.



And as you may recall, Jonah decides to sail as far from Nineveh as he can. He heads for Tarshish at the far end of the sea. But he gets swallowed by a whale and then is spat up near Nineveh.

And his worst fears are realized. The people repent. Outsiders become insiders. The unclean are received. God's love goes further than could be imagined or maybe for Jonah, farther than is desired.



From the New Testament we shared a story today, and again Joffa is the location, albeit eight centuries later

It's after Easter and Simon Peter is traveling about to share the good news. In the early days of the Christian movement there were questions about who was an insider and who was an outsider. The Way of Jesus began as a Jewish movement but as the gospel spread in the ancient world, non-Jews, outsiders, Gentiles were being drawn to the faith.

To be a faithful part of the Jewish covenant community, certain rules had to be adhered to: males had to be circumcised, and the Jewish dietary laws had to be followed...

In our day we know that our Jewish sisters and brothers may adhere to a kosher diet. So... practicing Jews in Peter's day had to refrain from eating all kinds of food, especially there were many kinds of meats that they could not eat. It's all set out in the Book of Leviticus. A faithful Jew could eat beef but not pork, fish but not lobster or crab, locusts but not moths or dragon flies, chicken but not stork or bat... Some of these rules seem quite sensible.

But Peter had been baptizing uncircumcised Gentiles and it was creating a scandal. To be a follower of Jesus did you not have to follow the insiders covenant rules? Were those unclean Gentiles really welcome?



So Peter tells the story we shared today. He was in Jaffa and he was in Simon the Tanners house.

The place where that house stood is still marked in Jaffa. It may have new walls and a new roof... And the place is still a private home. An Armenian Christian family, the Zakarian family, now owns Simon the Tanner's house, and while you cannot go inside their space to disturb them, they do have to live with many tourists stopping by their front door for photos.



In this place, in Joffa, Simon Peter has a vision. He sees a great sheet filled with all kinds of animals...And a voice tells him to go and eat.

Eating the animals he sees in his vision would lead to breaking the food laws of Leviticus, something that Peter as a faithful Jew has never done

But really his vision isn't about dietary rules. It's about the people who never observed those rules.

Peter vision shatters the barrier between Jew and Gentile. It redraws the circle of who is in and who is out.

To be in you must only eat this and never eat that? Not anymore. The Gospels call is wider than that. The circle of God's love is drawn further out than that.



Peter Rollins the Irish thinker started a Christian community named Ikon in Belfast, Northern Ireland... a place where lines were long drawn between Catholic and Protestant, Unionist and Republican...and they used as a foundational community statement the words of Paul to the Galatians: "there is now neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Rollins goes on to say that the divisions that Paul identifies in this passage are tribal, representing categories on which people may be divided. Jew or Gentile is a religious division. Slave and free... these are social, economic and political divisions. Male or female these are biological divisions, divisions inherent to a person's identity.

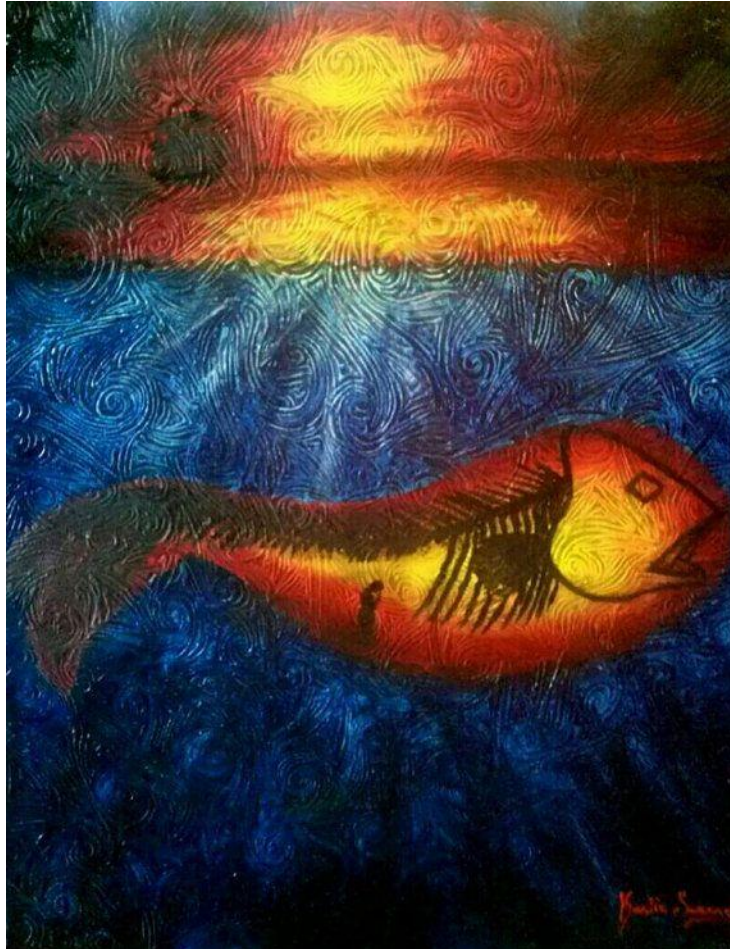
And so the Ikon community expanded Paul's statement for the modern day: In Christ there is neither Jew or Gentile , male or female, slave or free, straight or gay, believer or seeker, conservative or liberal, younger or older, richer or poorer... we are all of us one in Christ.

We live in somewhat tribal era, a polarized time. People are polarized politically, not just voting in different ways but sometimes thinking less of those who vote differently than they do. Sometimes political leaders play on this sense of division and deepen tribal divisions for their own benefit.

In our media use, traditional media and social media, people stay in tribes, listening only to voices that reinforce their already held points of view

We live in a time when people are encouraged to form tribal identities, seeing themselves and those like them as insiders and all others, those unlike them as outsiders, unclean. We easily divide on racial or linguistic or ethnic or religious or political grounds

Are we hard wired to be tribal, to see others who are different as unclean outsiders? Bo Winegard takes this lesson from evolutionary science that we humans by design: “are limited, parochial, biased, prone to violence, status competition, and nearly inescapable tribalism. “



But our Jaffa based stories present us with a holy push in another direction.

Jonah learned that there was neither Jew nor Ninevite, all were included in the bounds of Gods mercy. He didn't like it. He tried to run from it. But God's grace caught him and brought him to where he needed to be



Peter's vision at the home of Simon the Tanner showed him that there was no longer Jew or Gentile, covenant keeper or covenant outsider. The breaking of the covenant dietary rules made him very uncomfortable. The vision was repeated 3 times to drive the point home for him.

The point? That God's love is bigger, broader, deeper and wider than we know or even sometimes than we want it to be...



Simon Peter concludes his story from Joffa with these words: "if God gave them (those on the outside) the same gift he gave us ... who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

In both the Hebrew Scripture and in the New Testament, the old city of Jaffa is a place where the circle widens, divisions are shattered and where the breadth of God's love for each and every one is made known.