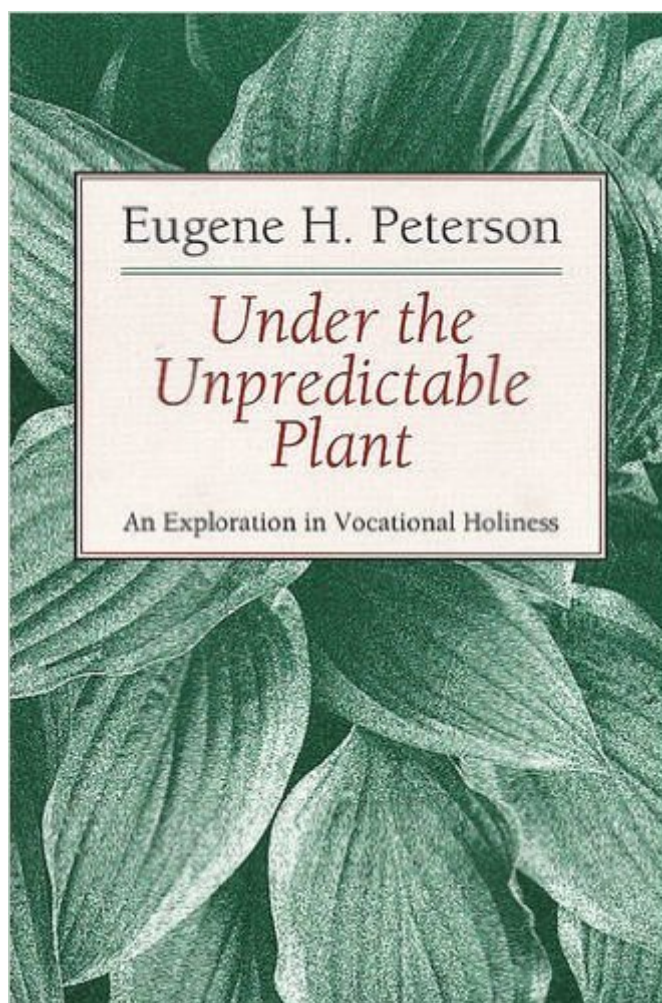


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# Under The Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration In Vocational Holiness



## Synopsis

In this book Peterson clarifies the pastoral vocation by turning to the book of Jonah, in which he finds a captivating, subversive story that can help pastors recover their vocational holiness. Peterson probes the spiritual dimensions of the pastoral calling and seeks to reclaim the ground taken over by those who are trying to enlist pastors in religious careers.

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## Customer Reviews

I am pastor of a United Methodist two-point charge. Two churches. Many headaches. I've been here three and a half years. I am told numerous pastors "start-out" in smaller, typically rural or town churches as mine are. Then we get noticed and we get moved on up the ladder. Better appointment--better pay--more prestige--better location. How many pastors buy into "the ladder"? More than you think. But Peterson does not. This book planted my feet deeply within my call. I wanted to move into bigger, better, different pastorates. Peterson would tell me, "You wanted to go to Tarshish instead of Ninevah." His book forced me to recognize that the grass is not greener in a different parish. Comparing me to Jonah, Peterson left me no excuse of any theological integrity to leave my two-point charge. So here I stay. But Mr. Peterson, if you read this..."Under the Unpredictable Plant" is a horrible title. Few of the dozens of people to whom I have recommended your book can remember that crazy thought.

I have been in lay leadership for over 20 years and this is the most accurate description of Christian

ministry I have ever read. How can we avoid being shaped by a congregation's longing for comfortable religiosity yet value lay spirituality? Peterson poses the question then gives us his story, his guts and his heart. I was deeply moved by his challenge to all Christian leaders to form a rule of life equal to our vocations. I plan to read this book again and again.

If you are: (a) a minister, (b) considering becoming a minister, (c) preparing to preach through the book of Jonah and/or (d) make up any combination of the preceding, this book should be required reading for you. As you read, prepare to be challenged ("The religious leader is the most untrustworthy of leaders: in no other station do we have so many opportunities for pride, for covetousness, for lust, or so many excellent disguises at hand to keep such ignobility from being found out and called to account." - page 15). As you read, prepare to glean insights ("The primary task, the pastor's primary task, is not communication but communion." - page 192) As you read, prepare to add substantially to your quote file ("Prayer is the most deeply human action in which we can engage. Behavior we have in common with the animals. Thinking we have in common with the angels. But prayer - the attentiveness and responsiveness of the human being before God - this is human." - page 111) As you read this book, prepare to be shaped by it!

This is the third Peterson book I've read, and one of the five books he has penned for pastors. As the title suggests, this book is developed around the story-line of Jonah whose disobedience and running from God parallel similar sins in pastors. Peterson confronts pastors who do not stay rooted in one place, succumb to the lusts of "ecclesiastical pornography" (see the quote in a review below), and serve up religion to parishioners by making golden calves. His playful prose explores multiple dimensions of the pastoral vocation including prayer, spiritual direction, and cultivating (as a farmer cultivates a field, as opposed to a developer excavating land to build a shopping mall) the top-soil of the congregation. A chapter which meanders through the works of Dostoevsky, gleaning numerous insights into the soul-work of pastors, was especially helpful. I found myself rebuked, refocused, revived, and refreshed in my reading of this book over vacation this year. Just what I needed. The exegesis in Jonah may be strained at a few points, but the pastoral theology is sound and I'm grateful for what I gleaned from this book. I plan to return to it again in the future.

Eugene H Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1992) Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw In *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Eugene Peterson charts the subversive story of Jonah and how it can help pastors develop a spirituality

adequate for their calling. He writes with personal honesty and with biblical insight, drawing on decades of pastoral ministry and thoughtful reflection on spiritual theology. I am encouraged by his pastoral heart beating through. His passion for seeing what God is doing in ordinary people and reading and teaching the Bible with awe is contagious. Yet he begins this book describing a pastoral crisis when he was 30 years old, ordained for 4 years, when he encountered a chasm between his faith and his vocation; his life as a Christian and as a pastor. In similar circumstances, many let go of their faith or of their vocation. Peterson determined to hang on to both. He did not want to merely hold on to his religious job, but retain the integrity of his calling as a pastor. He charts his prayerful journey into and out of the depths, following the subversive story of Jonah. Buying passage to Tarshish

Jonah was my son Ben's favourite Bible story. We sang almost every second night: 'Uh oh Jonah, you should've gone to Ninevah'. It's a story retold in Sunday Schools and dissected in theological colleges everywhere; the prototypical journey of the unwilling missionary. It also has lessons for pastors. When Jonah is called to Ninevah, he responds by going - but in another direction towards Tarshish. Peterson comments Tarshish or any glamorous ministry can be a lie that draws pastors away from their calling. Pastoral work is not an idealised exotic role but more like farming full of modest daily routines. Congregations are not normally ideal and glamorous workplaces. Some of the best advice I received was not to expect congregational life to make sense. But the talks of 'successful' pastors and the profiles of 'attractive' churches looking for a new pastor make pastors wonder. Sometimes this 'ecclesial pornography' (pictures of churches without spot or wrinkle) urges pastors to leave one church in search of a more attractive Tarshish. Peterson, though a long-serving pastor, was tempted to leave the church he served several times. But early in his ministry he had committed to stability, inspired by the Benedictine vow. At a time when monks were free to go from monastery to monastery, seeking the best feed, Benedict expected monks to commit to finding God in one place and working through any challenges there. When I told my partner Jen about the Benedictine vow of stability, after moving with me 18 times through 8 different churches, she responded instantly: 'Where do we sign?' For me who often looks forward to the next challenge, and in a society that encourages moving for career, stability is a countercultural discipline. I have often, like Jonah and Peterson, gone to the travel agent in Joppa and looked for a way out to Tarshish. I am not denying my call to ministry, but trying to manipulate my option of choosing a location. I have dreamt of expressing my vocation by teaching theological students who are eager to learn, leading retreats for workers passionate for renewal, or doing life deeply with an intentional community open to radical discipleship. But the door closes and I am reminded of my call to pastor locally. (Anyway, if all pastors who longed for theological education or dedicated retreat

leading left their churches, many pulpits may stand empty.) I am heading to Ninevah, although not for want of checking out Tarshish on google-earth. Peterson's caution is not to be like Jonah who even in obedience got it wrong because he went pouting. He was obedient in a professionalised way but resented the people he was sent to serve and through whom God wanted to teach him so much. Peterson has a refreshingly high view of congregation leadership and values long-term pastorates, suggesting they be the norm rather than the exception. He recognises God does call pastors to move, and sometimes a dysfunctional church or pastor means moving is the best option. But long-term ministry makes for the best conditions for church and pastor to grow to maturity. He encourages pastors to see a congregation as a place of growing in spiritual maturity rather than an opportunity to advance their career: 'the vocation of pastor has to do with living out the implications of the word of God in community, not sailing off into the exotic seas of religion in search of fame and fortune' (p.20). That is an inviting image to see pastoring not just as an opportunity to serve but as a context to grow. Escaping the storm Pastors do not belong in the religious ship voyaging to Tarshish. I have had several wake-up calls to remind me of my call. One was when opportunities for service in Asia closed off, and I learned to love God independent of ministry and love my family apart from their capacity to follow me to the ends of the earth. Wake up Daz! Another was when my daughters said to me 'Come and play. You are always on the computer, or always have something else to do.' Wake up O sleeper! The religious boat offers much to a pastor's ego and demands plenty of activity. But it does not make for maturity or fulfil our essential calling. There comes a time to ask for a shive off, or else gather up the courage and jump ship. Peterson once told his leaders he wanted to quit. He and his family were worn out by him 'running the church'. One of the leaders wisely asked him, "what do you want to do?" He said he wanted to focus on God and people: "I want to study God's word long and carefully so that when I stand before you and preach and teach I will be accurate. I want to pray, slowly and lovingly, so that my relation with God will be inward and honest. And I want to be with you, often and leisurely, so that we can recognize each other as close companions on the way of the cross and be available for counsel and encouragement to each other." (p.39) The leaders told him "do that, and we'll run the church." It was a turning point for repudiating Tarshish religious careerism and recovering his vocational holiness. Chaim Potok's mother pressured him to be a brain surgeon, not a writer, because he could save lots of people and make a lot of money. Potok responded, "Mama, I don't want to keep people from dying; I want to show them how to live" (p.47). This resonated with Peterson. Through his parallel calling as pastor and writer, he wanted to enter into the mess of life and prayerfully point people to God. Parish and pencil were his Ninevah. Storms can lead us to that kind of vocational recovery. What is the storm on our horizon I wonder? In

the belly of the fish

The centre of the book is Jonah's time of confinement and limits in the belly of the fish - his askesis. Like an athlete needs focused training for competition preparation, a pastor needs askesis for energy of spirit. The institutions and congregations pastors work with, as well as their own egos, are not always conducive to Ninevah-mission. To foster a spirituality ready for the task, pastors need an intervention to remind them they are not god. Peterson teaches the fundamental rhythms to cultivate awareness of God are:

1. Praying the Psalms over a month - rescuing us from self-absorption. (Jonah's prayer from the belly was full of Praises from the Psalms.)
2. Weekly congregational worship - grounding us in revelation, community and service.
3. Recollected prayer through the day - disseminating prayer into the everyday.

These are the utensils of a pastor's 'monastery without walls'. Other disciplines are optional, like garden tools to pick up and put down as needed to tend the soil of our souls; fasting, Sabbath, journaling, pilgrimage, sabbatical, meditation, exercise, tithing and confession. Peterson appeals to pastors to go to the depths as true contemplatives instead of using prayer merely as a consumer product or ceremonial gesture: 'If we do not develop a contemplative life adequate to our vocation, the very work we do and our very best intentions, insidiously pride-fueled as they inevitable become, destroy us and all with whom and for whom we work' (p.114).

Finding the road to Ninevah

Peterson did not grow up with pastors as positive role models. The book describes the wonderful influence of his mother and other mentors from his childhood church, but his pastors did not capture his imagination. Until, after ending up in an academic teaching career but needing a second job, he worked alongside a pastor he respected. It was a vocational turning point as he saw, and experienced for himself, pastoral ministry as where the action was. He realised pastoral work takes seriously where people are located. Jonah had to embrace the locale of Ninevah, and Peterson saw place as being intrinsic to being a pastor. James Joyce's *Ulysses* narrates the everyday life of Leopold Bloom in Dublin. Peterson aspires to look at his people's lives with the same imagination, to get the gospel story right but also exegetically get people's stories right. Visitation is thus not just a duty but research into people's stories of being shaped by Christ. Echoing Mark 16:6-7, he recites 'He is risen and going ahead of you into [this home], there you will see him as I told you'.

Inspired by the farmer-writer Wendell Berry, Peterson sees church as physical as a farm, and a resource to care for rather than take advantage of. A congregation is not the enemy to be defeated, nor a defunct group to be rehabilitated according to a pastor's ideal. Thomas Merton brilliantly said, "it is both dangerous and easy to hate man as he is because he is not 'what he ought to be.' If we do not first respect what he is we will never suffer him to become what he ought to be: in our impatience we will do away with him altogether." (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, NY: Doubleday-Image, 1968, p.145, quoted by

Peterson on p.135) Peterson asserts pastoral work is geographic but also eschatological. It listens for what God is doing locally but also opposes what ignores God and points toward an alternative future. Quarreling with God under the unpredictable plant The story ends with Jonah quarrelling and angry with God outside the walls of Ninevah. Anger is a helpful sign something is wrong, either inside or outside our self. For Jonah it was inside. His lack of imagination could not allow for God's plan being greater than his own ego. He could not envision God's grace and hospitality extending to the Ninevites after he preached judgement. One of Peterson's vocational mentors in Fyodor Dostoevsky; from him he learned the poverty of an inadequate model of ministry. Actually the pastor's role is to say 'God' into situations. It is not primarily about meeting needs. It is a role oriented to worship and service rather than market and career. It sees God in people rather than seeing people for how they can help the pastor's ego. It treats people with dignity rather than seeing them as problems to solve. It is Ninevah rather than Tarshish. Pastors recover their vocational holiness as spiritual directors rather than program directors. The book Jonah ends in Ninevah, but with an uncertain ending about how the prophet Jonah responds. Will he rise to the dignity of a spiritual companion to the people of the city, or revert to something less? What will be our response? Peterson says vocational holiness for a pastor is to clarify what a pastor is and then cultivate a spirituality adequate to support that. I find myself identifying with the bankruptcy and hope-for-renewal of Peterson and Jonah, and hope I will find myself at home inside the walls of Ninevah for a long time. Darren coordinates leadership training with the Baptist Union of Victoria and hosts a monthly Eugene Peterson lunchtime reading group. A version of this review may be published later in 2010.

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