

June 28, 2020

Jonah 1:1-10. The Message

Matthew 20:1-16. The Message

In keeping with the theme from last Sunday, that story of Joshua's great transition into leadership, you could say that both of these scriptures are stories of transition too. Jonah is in a great transition in his life, and those field workers are in a transition of a different sort, trying to come to grips with a grace they don't understand.

I have been thinking about transitions these past few weeks. As we think about the next steps in our own process here at Saint Mark and how it may be different because of COVID19, I plan to be sharing with you more about what this means as we go through summer and get into the fall season, but my approach to this time overall is that it is an opportunity to listen to the Spirit among us as we seek our next leadership, future direction and maybe even a new vision.

Many people in our church are in a transition as well. We have said it before, but getting used to new work arrangements, trying to sort new schedules for childcare, home schooling, so much transition is being forced upon us. People in some states, I have heard, are even having difficulty transitioning into simply following health guidelines - wearing a mask, physical distancing. It seems too much for some folks.

Jonah has a bit of difficulty making his transition. But both stories ask us to also make a transition in the way we think, which all great Bible stories do. Not only do we see Jonah deciding which way to go on his adventure, but also in Matthew, God asks us to rethink the way we see grace, love and mercy.

Let's look into the story of Jonah for a minute:

In a sense, Jonah was fortunate: God spoke a clear message to Jonah about his transition = "Jonah I want you to go to Ninevah to preach to the people there." So far that doesn't seem too difficult.

Now you recall from the story that Ninevah was the capital of Assyria. And much like today, they were not always friendly neighbors. You could probably say that the Israelites did not like the Assyrians in the least, and Ninevah was the core of those folks. They wanted nothing at all to do with each other.

So we can begin to understand why Jonah literally ran the other way when he got the message to go to Ninevah. He gets in a boat to Tarshish. Here's where we probably all remember the story from Sunday School. Jonah is defying God, he gets on this boat, and storms come up, the other people on board decide it is Jonah's fault, so they toss him overboard. He is swallowed by a large fish - a whale. Was it a metaphor, an allegory, a literal fish - yes we know a whale is technically not a fish, but a mammal.

It has been a source of great debate for centuries. In the meaning of the story it is not so important. The point is that Jonah is trying to run from God and you can't run from God.

No matter how fast or how far, you can't escape God's seeking, working to redeem us, to reconcile us to bring us back, to give us meaning in life.

Has this ever happened to you? Tried to run the opposite direction from the transition or task that God had for you?

One of our best friends in Pittsburgh Seminary used this scripture to describe his call to ministry - others have as well. He felt this strong urge to change his life and go into ministry, but something was in the way - a fear, an anxiety, he couldn't say for sure.

Clark went all the way to California to try to run from God, but it didn't work. He showed up back in Pittsburgh in September for fall term in an old VW with all his possessions in the trunk and simply said, "You win O God, send me to Ninevah"

He turned out to be a great student, and Clark accepted a call to minister in the Bronx on graduation.

Have you felt the Holy Spirit nudging you TO DO SOMETHING, TO CHANGE SOMETHING, TO LAUNCH OUT TO SOMETHING TOTALLY NEW? And maybe you have been resisting - listing all the good reasons why just is not feasible.

Well, Jonah did that, rejecting his commission initially. Now he's in the belly of a great fish, metaphorically, in the dark night of the soul.

The good news is, as Joseph Campbell writes,

"The dark night of the soul comes just before revelation. When everything is lost, and all seems darkness, then comes the new life and all that is needed."

The fish spits out Jonah on the land and by now the light is dawning on him. So now when God says, "Go to Ninevah, preach to the people" Jonah listens and he goes.

But this is not the end of the troubles for Jonah. Embedded in this story of transition is another reminder of who God is.

Jonah goes to Ninevah, preaches a tough message - threatens God's destruction of them if they do not repent - but then, incredibly, they hear the message, confess their wrongdoings, and express true sorrow and repentance.

The story takes an unexpected turn. Even though they are Israel's enemy, God forgives them! Shows them mercy, and loves them - the enemies of Israel! We would be celebrating this I am sure, but not Jonah. He is furious. They were the enemy, he felt they were getting away with murder and he did not want that. He said he would rather die than see this kind of unmerited grace and mercy lavished on his enemy. His cry is "Where is God's justice?"

SO there is a deeper transition at work here in this story. Not only a change in career, a change in venue, but a change in the entire way that Jonah understands who God is. Trying to come to grips with a Grace and mercy that he can't understand.

This is right up to our time of course. Jonah wants the God of Israel to get the Ninevites for getting them. And it's a vicious cycle that continues throughout the human experience.

We can relate to that I am sure. If I was to be honest, when it comes to justice and mercy, I usually want mercy for myself and I would like justice for the people who wronged me, Do you ever feel that way. Can anybody relate to that?

Professor Brown from Princeton said, in a way, if God is into this kind of scandalous mercy, which upsets Jonah, and maybe us, when will we see God's justice? Where does this thing end?

It's that kind of surprise ending that the parable of the Laborers in the vineyard shows.

Jesus tells the story which we read from the Message version where the workers were hired at different point of the day, some worked all day, others just an hour, and they all line up to get paid. The guys who just

worked an hour get full pay! The ones who worked since sun up are thinking, wow we are going to get a lot of money!

But they are furious when they just get paid for one day as well. Injustice!

Jesus says in the parable that the owner has dealt with them fairly and deals with others for reasons we do not know. God's kingdom is like that, says Jesus.

Where do you see yourselves in either of these stories?

There is a little bit of Jonah and Ninevah in me, and the 12 hour laborer and the one hour laborer in me. How about you?

God is a god of justice. That is clear from the scriptures, God is also a God of mercy. God's mercy by definition extends to those who don't deserve it. God mercy is deep.

And it's not just about loving our neighbors, or granting mercy to those who are our enemies, as important as that is. The real story is that the ones who receive grace are us.

That is who God is.

SO the other transition for Jonah and for us is when God calls us and we respond to God, can we allow ourselves to be open to God's ways as well.

As we think about who our church is and will be, can we remember that we are also disciples of Christ?

Are you in a life transition? Moreover is God calling you to do something you are trying to run from? Ninevah?

Is God calling our church once again to be a place that embodies the mercy and the grace and the love of God, even while striving for justice?

Can we extend grace to those who don't deserve it?

What Jonah discovered was that even when he was going the wrong way, making mistakes, God was with him, working the Holy Spirit and God's purposes with him and through him.

Like Joshua's story last week, it was all about where he was going, not where he had been.

And like Jonah, we know who goes with us along the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.