

Devotions – August 21-27, 2016
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Jonah: Learning and Re-Learning to Let Go

Sunday, August 21, 2016

Day One: Gravity **Bible Verse:** Jonah 1: 1-6

Remember as a kid, the first time you discovered that you couldn't fly, or make something move with your mind, or turn invisible? It was shocking! I remember really believing I could fly; really wanting to be able to fly. But no matter how badly I believed, how much I really wanted it, gravity and the floor seemed to be my only reality every time I jumped off my bed. Yet, what I realize in time now, is that life seems to be a pattern of these kinds of lessons. Maybe part of growing older is about learning our own limitations and in our experiences with those edges, meeting a God who is working in the midst of everything; even the places we come crashing down.

In the beginning of this text, Jonah quickly realizes that no matter the motivation and the strength behind his intentions, he cannot hide from God. Jonah cannot escape God's calling to a needed and complex work: the repentance of Nineveh. Jonah is pulled deeper by God through more than just a personal experience. Jonah is pulled into the reality that God's presence and calling over our lives is about encountering a God that transforms our lives for the sake of the world, our neighbor, and even our enemy. God is God and we are not and that is a very, very good thing. What does it feel like when we realize that our agenda is not *the* agenda? That God is setting the bearing. Our first experience of letting go may be to be aware that we are not superhuman after all; that indeed we are just human. But also being able to let go of whatever gets in the way of being a living witness to God's intentions for our lives.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we give thanks that there is no place we can hide from you. Open us up to feel your presence in our lives, and hear your calling for our passions. Help us to live our lives as a witness to you and what you have done for the world out of love, through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.



Monday, August 22, 2016

Day Two: School Yard Scuffles **Bible Verse:** Jonah 1: 7-16

I can still remember what it felt like. A surge of a combination of fear, adrenaline, and regret. The confusion of the encounter. The terror of being hit and the terror of hitting someone else. I was only 9, but I remember the first time I got into a fight on the school yard. I can still remember what the dirt tasted like when I was wrestling on the ground trying to get the best of the school yard bully. These moments seem to leave a residue; they leave an imprint on us that we can still feel.

If you have been in a school yard scuffle, I bet you can still remember that feeling. For many of us that grew up with siblings, our first experience of a fight may have been with them. These moments of chaos and hostility are scary and often leave us shaken and bruised. But it also overwhelms us with a feeling of something stronger than ourselves, pulling us into a bad situation. We are a part of it, yet not all of it; and in the midst of it, we come face to face with fear and consequence. We are forced to admit we are not in control and sometimes what we are a part of, impacts more people that we could ever have imagined. The men in the boat with Jonah have now become impacted by Jonah's rebellion. Their decision to put space between themselves and Jonah, even if they think he doesn't deserve it, was made with great hesitation and guilt. But they felt that throwing Jonah overboard was their only shot. It seemed to work as they hoped. When we read this part of Jonah, it is hard not to become aware of just what kind of danger Jonah put people in through his denial of God's calling. I think part of letting go and re-learning how to let go, is about being shaped to live in obedience to God's love and the love that's shared together with each other through the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Holy God, we know that our hearts can easily stray from what you have intended for us. Help us and shape us to live lives that let go of our own rebellion and ideas of control. Move us to live well with our community, to share goodness in every encounter, and to desire to follow your calling over life. Amen.



Tuesday, August 23, 2016

Day Three: Presence **Bible Verse:** Jonah 1: 17- 2: 10

A whale? A whale! Really? A whale? What exactly is this whale all about? It's amazing to me how quickly I see the whale as punishment. Maybe it has to do with the way this story was portrayed to me growing up. You know, the whole don't rebel against God or God will get a whale to swallow you. The logic seemed flawless at the time. However, a few years back I was sitting in a quiet park on a summer's day, reading through Jonah again, and it smacks me square in the face: "Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." The huge fish isn't a punishment, it's a gift! It is a huge, very needed gift. This fish is more than likely responsible for saving Jonah's life, at least in the context of this narrative. Without that assistance, Jonah would most likely have met his end.

It's in this space, oddly as it may be, that God has provided much more than just a living life boat. This space is not just where Jonah is being saved from disaster, but it is also the space where Jonah is remembering just who God is. It is a prayer that remembers that God hears our cries, gives us a bearing to turn to, stands by us and walks with us, and ultimately is the source of our salvation. This inner space will become the shaping moment for Jonah that will launch him back towards Nineveh when God calls a second time. Jonah's holding onto the agenda of his rebellion is slowly slipping into oblivion. Jonah is being drawn into God's ultimate reality for his life. How is God using unusual means to shape you for your calling in life? What are the spaces you feel God? What are the reminders that help you to remember who God is?

Let us pray: God of all Creation, you are the source and maker of all life. We praise you for the ways in which you shape our lives so that we may be drawn near to you. Help us to trust in the ways you create space for us to grow in our faith and remember your goodness. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.



Wednesday, August 24, 2016

Day Four: The Power of Power Bible Verse: Jonah 3: 1-10

Have you ever been to Yosemite? Have you had a chance to go and see the Sequoia Redwood Trees that tower in Mariposa Grove? Standing in the midst of those giant trees can have a profound impact on those who view them. What's amazing about those trees is that even though they have been around for thousands of years, we are still learning new things about them. It wasn't until the last twenty years or so, that we learned the Sequoia's actually need the heat of a forest fire in order create new saplings. Once the Mariposa Grove, along with Yosemite, was deemed a Federally Protected Area, there was a commitment to fight any wild fire without regard for cost or time. What we didn't know at the time, was fire was the very thing the trees needed in order to drop their cones and have them spread the Redwood seeds inside. The bark of the giant trees was made to stand up against the heat of these fires, and the blaze would clear a space in the undergrowth for the tree's seeds to be implanted. I can only imagine what it must have been like to discover this fact. If it had been me, I may have stood there in the midst of those trees and prayed something like, "God, indeed, knows what God is doing."

It's not easy at times to be in the midst of powerful things. Sometimes they can make us feel small and be aware of our own powerlessness. Sometimes powerful things can make us shy away. But there are also times when being in the presence of powerful things has a way of reclaiming our imagination about what it means to be a part of God's great and mysterious

Creation. I suppose that being vomited out of a whale could be a powerfully moving experience. So powerful, that this experience will shape the next encounter with God's call for Jonah. God's call for Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach repentance now has a new, shaping and powerful chapter. Jonah has encountered the power of God, and how lives are transformed by God's presence and calling. Now when God calls again, Jonah goes. However, God's second request of Jonah to go to Nineveh is actually bookmarked by two powerful events. The first being the whale, the second being the reaction of Nineveh itself. Jonah is surrounded by the evidence of what God's word does to the people whose hearts and minds hear God's word. He may have trouble hearing it, but he is learning to let go of who he thinks deserves this word. Jonah is beginning to see God's will for everyone to be drawn near. In what ways is God shaping you by God's powerful presence? What ways have you been a part of God's powerful ways? What did it feel like to be swept up in God's plans? Did this experience impact your life later?

Let us pray: God of power and might, we give you thanks for ways you work to redeem all of creation. Help us to let go of our own desires of power and encourage us to seek to be a part of your powerful ways in the world today. Amen.



Thursday, August 25, 2016

Day Five: Licking Wounds **Bible Verse:** Jonah 4: 1-4

"But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.... I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

One of the harder things I believe we face in our faith is how to discern between when our thoughts about God are a projection of ourselves, and when God is a projectile entering into our world to shatter how we think things should happen. Jonah has shown his heart. It is clear that there is something inside Jonah that wanted devastation. He wanted his enemies destroyed. Who doesn't want retribution? It's more than human to want revenge. It is however, a whole other thing, to want God to want the same thing. Jonah is eventually met by a God that can no longer be a projection of the cultural tribe. Jonah is met by God as a projectile, which shatters the cultural/religious notion of who is chosen and righteous. God has heard the cries of Nineveh, and saw their hearts turn back, and decided to spare them. In the back of his mind, Jonah knew God was going to do this. After all, this is the same God that had the whale spit him back out.

Was it right for Jonah to get angry? Most certainly it wasn't right for Jonah to get angry. However, it was also very human. Jonah is experiencing a moment where God is continuing to call him into a deeper understanding of what it means to follow God's will. Maybe part of

God's calling Jonah to Nineveh is not just to save the people there, but also to save the parts of Jonah's heart that cannot see the people of the city as important enough for God's salvation. I think that part of being a disciple is being able to be confronted by God in ways that call us to re-learn how to see the world and ourselves. Sometimes it means going home, even if we lick our wounds, and being different tomorrow. I think we could have a good discussion about whether the whale or the conversion of Nineveh had a bigger impact on Jonah. I suspect that one is just a continuation of the other.

Let us pray: Confront us, O God, so that we may be made to know your will. Rid us of those places that cannot see the expansiveness of your grace and goodness. Help us to be patient with each other that we may do the good work of your reconciliation, through Christ Jesus. Amen.



Friday, August 26, 2016

Day Six: Getting Off the Mat Bible Verse: Jonah 4: 5-6

Part of what I love about Jonah, is that he is so human in this text. I find myself reading his reactions and sentiments, and relate with where he is at and what he is feeling. But mostly, what I am most struck by in preparing these devotions is that by the end of this book it has become apparent that the deepest work of conversion and repentance that is needed is needed in Jonah's heart. The people of Nineveh have repented. They have covered themselves in sackcloth. They have fasted. They have demanded everyone call upon God's mercy. And God has heard them and responded graciously. I can hear Jonah in the midst of this decision, walking away with his arms crossed whimpering and whining that "God just isn't fair." So he goes East of the city and pouts. Yet, even here, God has refused to abandon Jonah. The leafy plant begins to grow.

One of the most powerful realities of God's love is that even when we are hurting and broken, even when we are confronted in our stubbornness and hardheadedness, God still chooses to be present with us and provide a space for us to process what is going on. I think that is important to hear. When we are confronted with parts of God's will and reality that we may not think is fair, or that we get upset with, we need to look for the space God is providing for us to be with God and to be turned back again to God. God does not leave Jonah alone in this moment of "hissyness"; rather God has a plant grow above him so that he will not suffer too much. In what ways has God provided a way back for you when you have become angry with life or with God? How did God provide things that were needed for you even in those times of discontent? How did you respond to those gifts?

Let us pray: We are so grateful God that you are a patient God. Thank you for standing with us even when we cannot get beyond ourselves and our understandings. Help us to seek your will and path in the world. Help us to be moved from our stubbornness and to soften the hard parts of our hearts. Amen.



Saturday, August 27, 2016

Day Seven: Restoration **Bible Verse:** Jonah 4: 7-11

I have a bit of an obsession for car shows where a group of mechanics get together, purchase an old classic car, and fully restore it back to original condition. Part of what I love about these shows is if the mechanics can find a way to salvage any original parts along with replacing the broken parts. I think there is something special about seeing a car that has had both its original fabrication fixed and shined up, and new parts to make it glow once again. Maybe I like this so much because it seems to be the way that God works with us. There are parts of us that have been around since the beginning, and then there are parts that God provide along the way that get added to help us shine.

The Book of Jonah doesn't end in the most satisfying of ways. We don't get to see Jonah make a complete turnaround in his heart and attitude. There isn't the typical modern story ending, where the "good guy" makes a triumphant return and everyone lives happily ever after. We don't get to see the hero of this text ride into the sunset, victorious. At least in the typical ways we think of success and satisfaction. But when we take a moment to listen to what is being said in this last section of Jonah, we see God working a powerful combination of both healing and growing Jonah in the context he is in, and providing him the things needed for future ministry. God is both healing and restoring the history of Jonah, and God is preparing him for his future. God is giving Jonah a new lesson; to know that there is a lot going on around him that is helping him and that Jonah has nothing to do with making or sustaining it. Yet God is involved, and God has done things that help to save and restore all of Creation. Jonah's final lesson in this book is to submit to the God who makes all things grow, who gives life to all of Creation, and who is the ultimate source of all. Jonah learns just with whom he is journeying. Jonah is learning that a disciple must learn and re-learn to let go of all our desires for control, power, revenge, self-righteousness, and our small ideas of fairness and salvation. This seems to me to be a lifelong work. May God continue to be with us in this journey, and may we learn again and again from the lessons of Jonah, to let go and let God.

Let us pray: Holy and Almighty God, you are the source and sustainer of all life. Help us to let go of our own ways and to trust in your ways. Give us the courage and strength to be reshaped by your will and desire for creation. Help us in our lives, to be continuously and constantly learning your ways for the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

