

“The Gospel of Hope”

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January 21st, 2018
3rd Sun./ Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-10

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested,
Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God,
¹⁵and saying,
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;
repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Let us pray... O God,
May we know our narrative as your people – and be able to share it.
May we keep the vision of your ‘kingdom’ before us as an achievable goal.
May we listen for how God is still speaking
through the stories of Jesus that come to us to tell.

Amen

‘Be aware of the stories that come to you to tell...’
That was a challenge given to me while I was still in seminary,
and experimenting with Biblical storytelling;
I found that stories *did* come to me!
A book called The Synoptic Gospels – which shows the gospels in parallel,
was an important tool to help me see how the same story
compared in each Gospel and what other stories preceded or followed,
giving them a context for a bigger narrative.

For example in Mark 4-5, Jesus calms a storm at sea and this is immediately
followed by Jesus healing a man with a ‘Legion’ of demons;
both stories being about calming storms –
one of nature and the other of human nature.
Another example is from Mark 9, where Jesus is transfigured on a mountain
and this is followed by him going down the mountain to heal an epileptic boy.
So, we see Jesus in a scene of sublime wonder as a mountaintop experience
then down into the depths of a valley of sublime terror.
Later, I would make the connection of both these stories with the turning point
of Jesus’ life leading up to his decision to go to Jerusalem.

Some of these stories would come to me when I would be asked to learn
and tell a specific story – and over time, I would see a connection
of that story with others I had already learned.
At the first Biblical storytelling festival I ever attended,
200 of us were in an auditorium and we were taught the story from Mark 2
of Jesus’ healing a paralyzed person.
At that same festival, I also learned the story from Mark 10 of Bartimaeus,
about Jesus healing a blind beggar who had been
a proud and honorable person.

Willard, p.2

In retrospect, I am realizing that the first Bible stories that came to me to tell...
were mostly from the Gospel of Mark.

That by itself is significant because of the special place that Mark's Gospel has
in the history of the Church.

I have told you on other occasions about Dr. Tom Boomershine
who founded the Network of Biblical Storytellers.

He wrote his doctoral thesis on the proposition that the Gospel of Mark
was originally a collection of stories that the early Christians
told in worship until they were finally written down.

Mark is the shortest gospel and it is action-packed in the sense of tight dialogue and
dramatic events punctuated by the word, 'immediately'!

Mark also provides the basic plot outline that Matthew and Luke follow,
though the Gospel of John does not.

So, Mark is important...

This summer, I visited Tom Boomershine and we talked about the origin of Mark –
and how it followed soon after the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero.

The apostles, Peter and Paul, had been executed by the Romans
along with other leaders of the early Church who were eyewitnesses –
and therefore, the storytellers about Jesus' words & deeds.

This suggests that the Gospel of Mark came from an oral tradition and
that it was necessary to write them down to compensate for the loss
of so many who had a living memory of Christ.

Even though the early Christian community expected Jesus' imminent return...
it hadn't happened yet and their leaders were dying off.

So, they had to do something, and that meant writing down the oral tradition
for the sake of future generations to hear this Good News of
how God was still speaking through Jesus Christ;
and the 'future generations'... means *us* and those who will follow us.

This is not a new insight as a lesson from history,
but in an age of competing ideologies – especially, radical extremisms,
the Gospel of Mark represents a message of hope.

The epistles or letters of Paul and other apostles,
were the primary source of instruction for the first churches;
The gospels were written after them.

Religious writer Marcus Borg went so far as to say that the gospels
were a 'product' of 'early Christianity'.

Some evidence of this is in how Paul spoke about the Christian community of faith
as the 'Body of Christ' and rarely used the term 'kingdom'.

On the other hand, the gospels used the word 'kingdom'
in the way that Paul spoke of the 'Body of Christ'.

Willard, p.3

This would have been quite bold considering that the gospels arise in the midst of a period where Christians were already suspect as a counterculture.

Active Roman persecution against Christians would continue – off and on for more than 200 years, until Emperor Constantine would finally endorse Christianity as the ‘kingdom’ religion of Rome.

Therefore, it is significant that in the first chapter of Mark, Jesus proclaimed the good news in this way:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

The lesson from Jonah represents the flip side of this message of the Word of God which was in the form of “Or else!”

“Forty days from now, Nineveh will be destroyed!” [Jonah 3:4]

Some people have to take a beating before they’ll know – and I know I have had to learn some lessons that way.

It seems that in this divisive time for our society, there is very little middle ground or even a willingness to see the merits of an opposing point of view.

In the story of Jonah, the people of Nineveh are the enemies of Israel and the Prophet Jonah hates them for it.

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to them, but he tries to run away – to no avail.

He is caught and finally goes to confront his enemy – and they’re converted! And Jonah is furious!

God reasons with Jonah – to “convert” him, by helping him find empathy for his enemy and the potential for reconciliation.

It took all of Creation to get Jonah’s attention – even a little climate change and not just a whale.

Finding empathy for the person you disagree with, is one takeaway from the Book of Jonah.

Being open to listen up for how God is still speaking and leading, is another.

So, what is the Good News for us in this time of ‘fake news’ and suspicion?

My hope has been that you have hope

the more you get to know your narrative as a Christian,

and that you will be able to speak with those who disagree with you...

and to speak with a confidence about God’s kingdom as a beloved community that is achievable on earth as it is in heaven.

Willard, p.4

My hope is that you won't be bowled over

by others' practiced arguments & narrative,

because you will know your narrative and what you believe about it.

My hope is that you will love them into submission,

because you have been loved by the God you have met

through these narratives about Jesus Christ.

My hope is that we will all be obedient to a vision of liberty and justice for all

as a Beloved Community that is possible...

I will close with the story of Bartimaeus from Mark 10:46-52...

And Jesus came to Jericho...

and as he was leaving Jericho, with his disciples and a great multitude,

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, the 'Son of Honor',
was sitting by the roadside.

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth passing by, he cried out,

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Some of the crowd told him,

"Be quiet!" [Because it might be considered treasonous to talk like that]

But he cried out all the more:

"Son of David, help me!"

Jesus stopped and said to his disciples,

"Call to him."

And they said,

"Take heart." "Get up! He is calling you!"

So, throwing off his blanket, he sprang up to present himself to Jesus.

Jesus said to him,

"What do you want me to do for you?"

And he said,

"Rabbi, let me receive my sight!"

And Jesus said,

"Go your way. Your faith has made it possible to be healed."

And immediately, he received his sight,

and followed Jesus on the Way.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Jonah 3:1-10 as found in the Common English Version,
describes what happened after Jonah was released from the whale.
Despite his reluctance to preach to the enemies of his people,
Jonah follows God's instructions to him...*

- ¹Once again the LORD told Jonah
²to go to that great city of Nineveh and preach his message of doom.
- ³Jonah obeyed the LORD and went to Nineveh.
The city was so big that it took three days just to walk through it.
- ⁴After walking for a day, Jonah warned the people,
“Forty days from now, Nineveh will be destroyed!”
- ⁵They believed God's message
and set a time when they would go without eating to show their sorrow.
Then everyone in the city, no matter who they were, dressed in sackcloth.
- ⁶When the king of Nineveh heard what was happening, he also dressed in sackcloth;
he left the royal palace and sat in dust.
- ⁷⁻⁹Then he and his officials sent out an order for everyone in the city to obey. It said:
None of you or your animals
may eat or drink a thing.
Each of you must wear sackcloth,
and you must even put sackcloth on your animals.
You must also pray to the LORD God with all your heart
and stop being sinful and cruel.
Maybe God will change his mind and have mercy on us,
so we won't be destroyed.
- ¹⁰When God saw that the people had stopped doing evil things,
[God] had pity and did not destroy them as [...] planned.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Mark 1:14-20

- ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested,
Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God,
¹⁵ and saying,
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;
repent, and believe in the gospel.”
- ¹⁶ And passing along by the Sea of Galilee,
he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea;
for they were fishermen.
- ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them,
“Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.”
¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.
- ¹⁹ And going on a little farther,
he saw James the son of Zeb’edee and John his brother,
who were in their boat mending the nets.
- ²⁰ And immediately he called them;
and they left their father Zeb’edee in the boat with the hired servants,
and followed him.