

Homily for the Third Sunday after Epiphany – Sunday, January 24, 2021

How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going

The title of this sermon is also the title of a book that I will be looking at with others in February. It is a recognition that these are liminal times in which we live, a kind of in between time, that doesn't offer the familiar touchstones. Not only do we need to live through strict quarantine, we are trying as three congregations to live into new life as one Parish; all in a time we cannot gather together physically. Our scriptures appointed for today offer us distinct challenges to how we approach moving forward when we cannot see our destination. Just like Jonah clings to the wooden safety of the boat, there comes a time to make a leap of faith into the unknown and maybe even treacherous water. There is no clear and straight path through a pandemic nor can the path through potential amalgamation be totally challenge free. This service is a reminder that we can worship together, we can discern God's presence together and grow in faith together. Ultimately every person in every generation who strives for faithfulness, needs to come to awareness that the way forward is not about us, it's always about God. And that is the poignancy of today's scripture.

I have been in ordered ministry for more than forty years. I always discover something new in the scripture I have seen and preached about many times. That tells me that God is speaking to us all in new and transforming ways. In these polarizing times of left and right, liberal and conservative, friend and enemy, where does our faith land, where is God? Not once but twice God calls Jonah to Nineveh. In modern reference that would be asking someone from Israel to travel to Iraq and telling them to repent. No wonder Jonah was reticent, his mission was dangerous; twice. The point is God is saying something to humanity locked into an attitude of one enemy against another. There is a greater justice and righteousness that is about God. Jonah argues with God about timing, couldn't he wait until life is easier, after the pandemic when relationships can be more normal. God does not wait for a better time in Jonah's time frame; there is an urgency to speaking out for justice and righteousness and it is now. Surprisingly for us as well as Jonah, the people are persuaded to reform and secondly the leaders of Nineveh do as well.

I was reminded of those whose voices stood against apartheid in South Africa, who suffered imprisonment, appalling violence, and injustice. Then there is a recognition that when enemies come together God happens, and justice and righteousness happens. Our three congregations are certainly not enemies, but we have been living separate faith lives and it is wonderful that we can at least gather in this Zoom room together. And God will let us know where we are going.

This urgency of attending to God in our midst is also reflected in the Gospel of Mark. Mark does not use a birth narrative but begins immediately with Jesus' Baptism and the beginning of ministry. Mark uses the word "immediately", twenty-six times between the beginning and half way through to the Transfiguration. The second part of this shortest Gospel is full of geography and the steady journey toward the cross. Inherent in the Gospel is encountering God whose promise draws us from the familiar to the daring, out of the safety of the boat to the shore to attend to righteousness and justice.

There are similarities between the mission to which God invites Jonah and the call of the fishermen by Jesus. The brothers who were fishing would not be running their own fishery. The Roman Empire would have had majority control of the resources of the community. The fishermen might not have even enough fish to feed their own families and communities. As we can see around the world in oppressive regimes, the poor are left to struggle against enormous odds. And even in non-oppressive leadership, the poorest are isolated in their struggles. God notices and the poor fishermen are invited to be fishers of humanity. God is inviting those who follow to a bigger vision, God's vision. This call to follow is ushering in the kingdom of justice for the poor, mercy for the oppressed and abundance for all. It took courage for Jonah to head into an enemy jurisdiction; courage for the disciples to move outside the directives of the Roman Empire; and frankly it takes courage for us to discern God's vision for ministry and mission in our neighbourhoods and for us to make our own leap of faith.

Even Paul points to an urgency for the people in Corinth. As the world around changes, Paul advises people not to get caught up in what has been normal for them. There isn't even a new normal being proposed. Paul is opening people's hearts and minds to embrace a God who is doing new and transforming things. This isn't a journey of faith seeking out what will be our new normal. We have heard that language a lot during this pandemic and in all honesty, we have found ourselves exploring that question of discerning normalcy. God however is always bigger than us. While we are trying to peer through the mist to find a new normal, God is already at work "doing more than we can ask or imagine". That is our leap of faith. Everything will not be clear and obvious during our exploration of amalgamation. Paul says that we won't be able to secure all of the way forward because we always have to take into account what God is doing with us and sometimes in spite of us.

Jesus is promising a new kind of kingdom and that makes it possible for the disciples to leave oppression and follow. Jonah takes the risk twice to speak to a people to embrace a new more just world. And now in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of civil unrest and fear mongering, and in the midst of discerning how to embrace three congregations into one Parish; we as people of God are being called to follow. We are called to follow God's vision which will always be larger than our imagination. And like Jonah, and like the disciples, and like the early Christians, we will stumble, waver and maybe even fall, but God is big enough to work with that. As faith leaders, which includes all of us gathered here, who aren't sure where we are going, nevertheless we are being called to immediately drop our normal thinking and doing and follow Jesus and God's dream for the whole people of God.

It is not about us; it is about God.

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, Glory to God from generation to generation, In the church and in Christ Jesus Now and Forever, Amen.

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