

Third Sunday in Epiphany January 21 2024

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

The shape of the world is changing. And that change is seeming to bring with it social turmoil and upheaval.

The political stasis that has existed in the world since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1991, almost 33 years ago, has broken loose. Russia has started the first invasion of another sovereign country in Europe since the end of World War II with its fight against Ukraine. China is aggressively eyeing Taiwan and throwing a loop around territorial waters it shares with neighbors Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The Middle East is heating up with Israel fighting in Gaza and trading blows with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran is exchanging words and attacks with Pakistan and supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen as they attack shipping in the Red Sea.

Here at home, our politics has grown more entrenched, norms of public behavior have changed, the shape of our cities and work have been altered by COVID and the aftermath.

The shape of the world is changing.

This is just what Jesus is telling those to whom he proclaims. Now, the shape of Jesus' world has already changed- through the waters of baptism, as he saw the heavens themselves split and God's very presence came down on him. A spirit that drove him into the wilderness to struggle with what it meant to him and his life that he was God's son. The one whom God loved.

Now, post shift, firmly stepping into that identity, Jesus proclaims to everyone who will hear. The world is changing. The time has come- the reign of God has come near. So near you can feel its breath on your face.

And this change demands, requires a response. You can take some time- like Jesus did out in the wilderness- to ponder what it means. But you will have to respond. Somehow.

The shape of the world is changing. And it demands a response.

The prophet Jonah, at God's direction, reluctantly proclaims this message of a changing world to the mortal enemies of Israel, the Ninevites. It would be like Jonah going to Hamas and offering them this deal- repent of your ways, and God will forgive. Don't and in 40 days they will be destroyed.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians warns the church in Corinth of the same things. The way the world works now is passing away. Nothing will be like it was.

And in each case, a response is needed.

The Ninevites, even through the minimal and reluctant warning of Jonah, see the error of their ways and repent- express their sorrow for what they have done and change their ways... and God relents. God forgives. Because that is who God is.

Paul warns the Corinthians to put aside even what is most valued in this world, because the shape of the world is changing. What was important today, will be as nothing tomorrow. We don't know exactly how they respond, but we know the church in Corinth continues. So they must have changed with how God was moving.

And then there is the proclamation of Jesus in which he tells us how to respond- repent- change your thinking and change the trajectory of your life- and believe that in Jesus the reign of God has come near. That God's way of doing things will be taking over.

If you don't change, things will not go well for you. It will lead to your destruction, not because that is what God brings or wants, but because you will be married to things that are falling away. Because to not trust Jesus attaches you to things that are not conducive to everlasting life. To life fuller and more abundant.

In each case, the way to deal with a changing world, is to follow God's lead. The Ninevites believe God and turn from their ways. The Corinthians prepare themselves to let go of what had been important to them, and to value what God values. For Simon and Andrew, James and John, it is to be ready to drop everything that was important- your job, your family responsibilities, everything you knew, and walk in the footsteps of Jesus as his disciples. To see what God is calling them to in Jesus as the most important thing to their lives.

This Epiphany season we have talked about our own baptisms- how in these waters God has claimed us as beloved children. How those same waters have made us one in the Body of Christ, embedded us into a community of faith that we need. How, like for Jesus, this moment of baptism is one that changes everything in our lives. And, eventually, demands a response.

And often that response is to let go of the way things were and embrace the way things are as followers of Jesus. To trust that God in Jesus does know what is best

for us. Faith is not some intellectual assent to certain propositions. It is an active trust, movement, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. To literally, follow his lead.

Now, part of that can look like what we're studying together in Confirmation. The Ten Commandments are a legalistic way to get at what the reign of God looks like in action. That God is the one we fear, love, and trust the most. To trust God when God says, you take a day of rest to remember that I am God and you are not. That we partake regularly in the Word of God which sustains our lives. That we live with those around us in ways that build them up, assume the best of them, respect them as fellow humans created in the image of God, and respect those things God has given them to steward.

And then Jesus comes along in his Sermon on the Mount and says, it isn't just about what you do, folks. You have heard it said, don't murder. Well, I tell you don't get angry at them. Don't even murder them in your head because that's just as bad as if you had done it. It isn't just about your actions, it's about your intent, your thoughts.

But the fullness of what it means to live in the reign of God isn't about what we do as we follow along after Jesus. That's part of it. But it starts with what God in Jesus does for us.

In the waters of baptism, being made a citizen of the reign of God, means we live by God's rules. So, you are freed from the rules of this world. Just as Jesus frees the leper from his disease that keeps him isolated from society. So you are freed... from the need to look perfect, to have a Tik-Tok life. You are freed from your self-doubt about whether you are good enough. About how you are doing

as a parent, or a child, or a spouse. You are freed from all those things that keep you isolated from others.

You are freed to take risks in loving others, because God always has your back. To love as God in Jesus loves- the outcasts, the marginalized, the unlovable. To go out and be among these because Jesus at the end of Matthew promises to be there. To meet us in those encounters.

When we trust in Jesus, have faith in him, the shape of the world changes, and we can say... thanks be to God! Because then we pursue peace. Because then we pursue love. Because then we pursue justice. With all the same passion that Jesus brought to those pursuits.

Friends, the shape of our world is changing. In ways that do not follow the reign of God. Our response is shaped by the fact that we are citizens of God's reign first. That we are freed from anything that says we have to follow along with the rest of the world. Instead, we are called to tell others- it doesn't have to be this way.

I know a place where we practice loving everyone, even those who we disagree with about almost everything. I know a place where when someone messes up and hurts me- we seek reconciliation with them. We tell them about the hurt. We listen as they express their remorse. We reconcile with them by sharing God's peace that comes to us in Jesus.

It's the body of Christ that is the church. It isn't perfect- far from it. But when we are at our best. When we remember that in baptism we too are beloved children of God, that we too are called by Jesus to follow him, that we too are citizens in God's reign, then this is the best place on earth. A refuge from the storm of the

world, a place to be fed and refreshed through this Meal of Christ's own body and blood. To be reminded of who and whose we are in these waters of baptism.

To hear again the good news of God. That the shape of the world is changing. That in Jesus- God's reign has come near. So near you can feel its breath on your cheek. And that reign is one of peace, reconciliation, healing, and love. And that reign is for everyone. You, me, our friends, and our enemies.

Thanks be to God!