

2018 01 21 TUMC, God is Revealed: Now What?
Epiphany, Embracing Change.

Today's scripture readings are full of surprises and unexpected outcomes. If they are not surprising it might be because they are also pretty well known stories. Fresh from his rescue from the belly of the whale, Jonah finally visits Nineveh, the enemy city. It's just him against this enormous, powerful and legendarily evil city, and against all odds everyone in the city believes his message, repents of their evil, and seeks God's forgiveness. Didn't see that one coming, did you?

And in Mark's account of the start of Jesus's ministry, he is passing along the sea of Galilee and calls out to some men, busy at their work, invites them to join him. And wouldn't you know it, they do, apparently without a second thought or a backward glance, skipping out of work in the middle of the day to follow him. Who does that?

Well, this is Epiphany, the time when we explore the ways that God is revealed to the world, the things that happen when God is found amongst us. The story of Epiphany radiates out from the visit of the Wise Ones, the Magi, to Jesus and his family. That was another story with a surprising outcome. They searched for years for a king in a palace and instead they were led to the baby of peasants.

But Epiphany is about more than just the surprise reveal... it is about what happens next. About reaction and consequence. In the case of the Magi, once they were done worshipping, they packed up and fled in secret at the urging of an angel. And then the trouble really started. Life got a lot harder from then on. The family were thrown into exile, and only returned after King Herod's death.

But not all the Gospel writers care about Jesus's birth and early life. As far as our friend Mark is concerned, Jesus's story begins later on, when he is baptised by John, named from heaven as the Son, the Beloved. And then the trouble really started. Life got a lot harder from then on. Jesus is thrown into the wilderness, tempted by Satan, and only returns after another King Herod has John arrested.

And that is where our Gospel reading takes place; Jesus beginning his ministry, calling his first disciples, with this knowledge in his mind. When people know who he is, the Son of God, when they see the authority he speaks with, which challenges Kings and Priests by his very presence, bad things happen. Life gets harder.

Is it any wonder that he travels around so quickly in Mark's gospel, and Jesus takes such efforts to silence anyone who would tell people who he really is? These times are full of motion and tension. John has been arrested and Jesus is going from place to place saying 'the time is now!' And in the middle of all that Jesus passes some folks out fishing and asks them to join him, and they immediately agree!

Without a second thought! Now some people believe that these early disciples must have already known something about Jesus. They must have heard good things, and that is why they were so quick to follow him. But I think any shrewd person who knew something

about Jesus's life up to that point would have known that this guy will mess your life up. They would have been smart enough to stay away.

And speaking of being smart enough to stay away: Jonah did his very best. He heard God's command to go to Nineveh and he fled in the other direction. But here he is, crawling out of the whale puke, and once more hearing God tell him what he already heard - go to Nineveh, tell them my message. And he does, and the people believe him, and they change their wicked ways. If you know the way the story goes on, Jonah is not happy about that at all, because he was looking forward to some real fire and brimstone, but everything happens quickly, easily, and according to God's plan.

Both stories defy common sense. Jonah is stuck with a city of implausibly repentant sinners and his own rage and frustration. And the newly-minted disciples have thrown their lot in with Jesus who is just getting started. Everything has happened very quickly and now there's a moment to take a breath and ask "Now what?"

What happens now? Why has this happened, and what will happen next? Is this normal life now? We have heard God's voice, turned and followed, and now... what will the consequences be?

Well. Before we go any further, I have three core principles for this topic that I need to share with you. If you're taking notes, this is a good thing to record:

- 1) God's desire is to be present with us, to be in relationship with us. This is a pure gift, grace, not because we have earned it, but because of who we are. God wants to be in relationship of love. Sometimes we describe that relationship using a metaphor of a parent, or a spouse, or a creator. Establishing this relationship is God's objective.
- 2) The person of Jesus is God's way of opening up that invitation to relationship with us. And how we humans respond to Jesus is up to us. We are free to respond however we are able. Each individual's own desires and capacity determine how they will respond to the life, teachings, and representation of Jesus.
- 3) When God is revealed to us, when God dwells with us, when we align ourselves as siblings of Jesus, things in our world are subject to change. But change follows afterwards. We do not have to change things so that God can be revealed, but when God is revealed, is present, a consequence of this is that things change. And this change is not always easy or pleasant, and this change is sometimes resisted, the way that the political and religious elite resisted Jesus when he walked the earth.

Now, for us in this day and age, things are more complicated when it comes to the second principle - the way that God invites us into relationship through the person of Jesus. Because Jesus is not present for us today in the same way that he was present to those fisherfolk by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said 'follow me' and they said yes, which leads them directly to the third principle - the change that begins to occur once you are walking with God. For the first disciples it was easy to see those changes in the world around them as Jesus healed people physically and spiritually. And the resistance was also pretty obvious.

The invitation is not as clear cut these days. What is a person invited to do? Learn about Jesus? Pray to Jesus? Act like Jesus? These are all quite different activities. What makes a

person a follower of Jesus? Attending church? Getting baptised? Or believing certain things? What happens if your life as a follower of Jesus is not much different to the life of someone who is not a follower of Jesus? What if Christian values and ideas are actually found in the culture or legal system you were born in to? How do you know that you are actually a follower of Jesus?

Look at the scriptures. How does God's revelation affect the lives of those that choose to follow? These disciples left behind their jobs, their families and responsibilities, and their security. That is a pretty big commitment! Although the Gospels don't give us a lot of detail about their day to day existence, we get the idea that being disciples became their main occupation.

Now some people might make significant lifestyle changes as part of becoming a Christian, leaving behind unhealthy relationships or patterns of behaviour, but that is a sign of liberation. We don't ask people to walk away from healthy relationships and responsibilities, from spouses and children and jobs to come and learn from Jesus.

And we can look at that difference in impact, and think that our own model of discipleship, the way we teach people to follow Jesus, does not look very impressive compared to those early disciples. In fact, this is even more evident in one of the other texts assigned for today, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He writes:

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

By and large, the lives of us Christians in the 21st Century don't feature those extremes, those sudden disruptions of existence that follow the revelation of God and the decision to follow Jesus.

So are we really following Jesus if we're not being disrupted?

To unravel this, we need to go back to the story of Jonah, and to the first principle I mentioned. If you remember, the first principle is simply that God desires to be in relationship with us. Once that relationship is established, then change will occur, but change is not the reason. The reason is that God loves us, and wants to know us. The book of Jonah shows this very clearly.

Jonah believes that Nineveh is evil, the enemy of the people of God, and it would be a good day that sees it wiped off the face of the earth. God tells him to go to Nineveh and he runs in the opposite direction. We assume that he is scared of the mission, worried about his safety in that evil place, but alongside that, Jonah's desire is for Nineveh to be destroyed. That is Jonah's desire. But God's first desire is that the people of Nineveh would come into relationship. If God's main objective had been to stop their evil, then there would have been no need for Jonah to warn them. God could have just destroyed them. But God valued all of

those people and animals, and believed that they were capable of repentance and change. That's the first principle.

Now Jesus is not present for the people of Nineveh, but God provides a way for them to be in relationship when Jonah reveals God's intention. The people respond in the way that makes sense to them - fasting, wearing sackcloth, and changing their ways. God is revealed, and change happens. And change, as we have said, meets resistance. What is fascinating is that it is Jonah himself who resists to the mercy that God has shown to these hated enemies, and the rest of the story is God explaining this scandal of mercy to the sulking prophet.

The book of Jonah shows us a compassionate God who cares about the big picture - the enormous city teeming with people and animals trapped in unrighteous, broken relationship. And this God also cares about Jonah's petty grievances, offering him the same grace and relationship of love. The book of Jonah reminds us that change is not the intention of God's action in the world. It is the consequence. God's intention is the restoration of relationship. And Jonah's failure to grasp that, his own strained relationship with God, is why we do not see his change of heart away from his own hatred.

When Jesus walked the Galilean countryside with his friends, he was declaring that the Kingdom of Heaven was near. He himself was establishing God's relationship on earth. Naturally, things started to change. Because God was seeking relationship through Jesus, where Jesus went people were healed and released. They left behind their work and their lives to be with him. These were the changes and disruptions that flowed from God's first intention of establishing relationship.

So where are those disruptions today? Isn't God establishing relationships today?

My belief is that the church absorbs these disruptions. In history and across the ages the church community develops as a response to the persistent presence of Jesus, the coming of the Holy Spirit. The church does not exist to change people, but it consists of changed people, and people encountering God. People that encounter Jesus necessarily experience disruption in their life, but the church, when it is working well, 'smooths the rupture'. It supports, catalyses and develops the changes that people experience in their lives as they grow closer to God.

This is the fourth principle at work:

- 1) God wishes to come into relationship with us.
- 2) Through responding to the story of Jesus, we can respond to God's invitation
- 3) When we respond, things start to change. When things start to change, we encounter resistance
- 4) The church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, helps us to endure difficulties and deepen our relationship with God.

And isn't it **good** that today is World Fellowship Sunday, where we remember our place in the worldwide family of churches, supporting one another through difficulty as we bring the message of God's love into the world.

And it's it **also good** that today we have a remarkable opportunity to consider how our own church is functioning as a place for people of all capacities and gifts to encounter and express that message?

It's almost as if it was planned.

Jesus meets us on the way to appointments and in the blank spaces in our schedules. He isn't waiting for a particular qualification or for you to believe a particular doctrine or achieve a specific wealth level. He's just looking to get the conversation going. What happens next? Well, that's what we are here for.