

January 21, 2024
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Showing Up: Being Human

There is always a risk in hearing stories that sound vaguely familiar to our ears. The moment they begin, it is tempting, because they are well-worn and seemingly understood, that we fail to listen as attentively as we might. We know the ending, so what possible new insight can be had?

Each Sunday we push up against this possibility as we listen again and re-tell ancient stories that can take on fresh insights if we are open.

This morning we hear two potential ways to respond to the call of God in our lives: flee or follow.

Jonah is our runner. Today's passage from chapter 3 continues the story of the favorite prophet of every children's Bible – swallowed whole by a big fish imagined or portrayed as a whale.

The backstory of Jonah: When God calls him to go in one direction, he goes the opposite way. When God tells him to go the powerful city of Nineveh to preach about all that they were doing was wrong, he slips out of town. He gets on a boat, encounters a storm, finds himself tossed overboard, and swallowed but that fish for three days and three nights. Inside that fish, alone only his thoughts, he prayed. His prayers were not so much "help me, help me, help me" but more like "thank you, thank you, thank you." Jonah prayed his way through this almost death experience by giving thanks – a lesson for all believers. He finds his way through by remembering that God was with him the entire time. He was not alone or forgotten. It is a truth you and I need to hear and remember and share.

We are not forgotten. We are known. We are loved. These are sweeping and hopeful statements that we hear in church -- how do they take on flesh and come alive?

Rabbi Sharon Brous from Los Angeles wrote an Op-Ed in the NY Times yesterday that is worthy of our attention: "Train Yourself to Always Show Up." She referenced an ancient pilgrimage practice in Jerusalem when two different groups of people circled in opposite directions on the Temple Mount.

First the people who arrived first would circle in one direction, and then another group -- the brokenhearted, the mourners, and the lonely and the sick -- would walk in the other direction. One clockwise, the other clockwise, meaning that they would have to face one another. And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into that person's eyes and inquire: "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?" And when they learned what happened, they would say: "You are not alone" or "May the Holy One comfort you." And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

Rabbi Brous reminds us that “showing up for one another doesn’t require heroic gestures. It means training ourselves to approach, even when our instinct tells us to withdraw. It means picking up the phone and calling our friend or colleague who is suffering. It means going to the funeral and to the house of mourning. It also means going to the wedding and to the birthday dinner. Small gestures remind us that we are not helpless, even in the face of human suffering. We maintain the ability, even in the dark of night, to find our way to one another. We need this, especially now.”

Many of us are probably wondering what the future will hold, how our human story will play out, how we as a people, a nation, a world, can tackle what some see as existential challenges. A beginning might be to see the wisdom in showing up for one another in our full humanity.

Yesterday I saw again the purpose power of being a church community. We gathered to honor and remember a child of God who called Christ Church his home for 35+ years. He was our bookkeeper for time. Many of you received birthday cards from him. Al Parker was born with physical challenges, which did not prevent him from getting a college degree, the first in his family. As the years went on, his mind was not always clear, and his behavior could be erratic. Members of this church shopped for him and brought him here on Sundays. Al gave casual-church a new meaning when pajama bottoms were the sometimes best he could muster on some mornings. He could be difficult, needy, and he knew the Creed by heart and sang hymns at the top of his lungs and was always a beat of ahead or behind the prayers we would say together. Al died last month. He believed and trusted in our Lord. If there was any fear that few would attend his funeral, that concern fell away as more and more people braved a cold day and showed up. Showed up for one of our own. Standing around on the packed snow to pray Al’s earthly remained into the Garden vault.

Remember that Epiphany is the season of light and breaking open the meaning of Christ coming into our lives. With light, we can better see what God desires to show us.

Jonah realized that he had to stop running.

He found life again and got another chance. God comes to him a second time, and says, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” This time Jonah does not flee in the opposite direction but moves forward, learning the lesson that children and grown children eventually learn: we can run but we can’t hide.

Jonah got another chance.

How many second chances have you and I received over a lifetime? A second chance to make things right, to say we are sorry, to learn from mistakes. I would wager: a lot. And because we live and move within in a faith that says: forgive as you have been given, love one another as God loves us, we are stand in that place where God and grace wants to keep us open to bending, opening, and hoping against hope that we will know when it’s right to say: go in peace, the Lord be with, I wish you well.

We hear about Jonah alongside the story of the Jesus gathering his followers alongside the sea. Another fish story. Instead of being swallowed up a large fish, they respond to Jesus's call to become fishers of people.

For Simon, Andrew, John and James, their response was immediate. They dropped everything and followed him. It was that same sense of urgency that Paul brought to his own missionary work. He wrote to the church in Corinth that the moment called for swift action: even those with wives be as those with none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing. For the present form of the world was passing away. (I Corinthians 7:29-31). Paul have been off with the chronological time of the passing, but he was right on in the way that life marches forward and for anything significant to change, it has to start now.

How can you and I be as strong and immediate as the once time fisherfolk turned into holy people encased in stained glass windows with churches named for them?

I think about what they left behind – and about what they found and experienced in the new places they went.

One of the interesting twists in the streaming series *The Chosen* that so many have been watching over these past three seasons, is the imagined relations between Simon (later Peter) and his wife Eve. We see the director playfully imagining how the husband and wife had to make room for another in their marriage: and his names was Jesus and his showed up at their home in Capernaum at all hours and brough with him a bunch of straggly, dusty and hungry followers. As it turns out it is not easy to follow, and it's not always easy to stay.

Knowing these ancient stories is part of our tradition and grounds us to meet today's realities and challenges.

There is a retired Methodist minister from Maine, Steve Garnass-Holmes, whose reaction to Jesus saying: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" is this:

"I don't think he meant for us to catch them, haul them into our boat with some evangelistic net, capture & manipulate them. I think he meant to change our focus from fish to people. Fishers know where the fish are and go there; they learn to think like fish; they value fish. Their lives are centered around fish. Become attentive to people, Jesus meant, go where they are, let their beauty flash before you. Center your life around them and their well-being. Just follow, and you'll discover what it means."