

Worship with McClure United Church

~Revisiting Sunday School Summer Worship Series~

July 19, 2020

Welcome and Announcements

Good morning everyone and welcome to the worship of God with McClure United Church this morning. As an affirming ministry of the United Church of Canada, McClure United publicly affirms and welcomes all people regardless of age, ability, race, economic status, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.

We acknowledge that we are offering this time of worship from Treaty 6 territory, homeland of the metis people and invite you to take a moment to acknowledge the land where you are now...as together we pay our respect to the First Nations and Metis ancestors and keepers of this place.

Thank you so much for joining us for this virtual worship time. What a gift it is to be able to connect with so many of you in this way. Definitely not the same as gathering in person but good to worship God together and know we are being safe and keeping our more vulnerable friends safe as well. Jordan and I have really appreciated the comments, questions and feedback on our summer series this far. We are enjoying the opportunity to engage together in these important stories. After today we will be moving into some of our Christian scripture stories and look forward to more conversation together and with all of you.

I have really enjoyed our Friday coffee times. There have been about 10 folks who have gathered for the past 3 Fridays. We have been very fortunate with good weather to meet in the parking lot but we do also have permission to go inside in case of rain. So if you are interested in joining us this Friday, please let me know.

And so, now as we prepare our hearts for worship I invite you to take a moment to open yourselves to the light and love of Jesus. I light this candle as a reminder of Christ's light and I pray you will feel the hope of that light move through you and settle on your heart.
(light candle)

Opening Prayer

We gather now God in your loving presence and in community with all those near and far who are watching this now. Thank you for all the ways you continue to make yourself known in our lives – we know, God, that even a pandemic cannot keep you from us... your love is persistent and relentless – and for that we give you thanks. So may we now open our hearts to your love – allowing you to fill the spaces within and around us.. trusting in your goodness. We ask your forgiveness when we drift away from or even push away your presence. May we always find our way back to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Scripture:

this story, called "The Funny Story of Jonah" is from Ralph Milton's Lectionary Story Bible

Jonah was just walking along, minding his business when God spoke to him. "Jonah!" "What?" said Jonah.

"Go to Nineveh and tell the people that unless they stop doing wrong things, I'm going to destroy them."

Jonah didn't know what to say. But he knew he didn't want to go to Nineveh, whether God said so or not. So Jonah ran away. "I'll run away to Tarshish. That's as far as I can get."

Jonah found a boat that was going to Tarshish. "Good," said Jonah. "God won't find me here on this boat." So Jonah went down inside the boat and fell asleep.

While he was sleeping, a very bad storm came up. The waves were big. The wind was blowing. "Help!" yelled the sailors, "we are going to drown."

One of the sailors went and woke John up. "How can you sleep when there's such an awful storm? We might drown."

Jonah saw the big waves and the strong wind. He knew what was happening. "It's all my fault," Jonah said to the sailors. "I made God angry. The only way you can get this storm to stop is to throw me into the water."{

"We can't do that," said the sailors.

"You have to," said Jonah. "Or we'll drown."

So the sailors threw Jonah into the sea.

Suddenly, a great big fish came and swallow Jonah right up.

Gloop!

By this time Jonah knew that when God said, "go to Nineveh," God meant "go to Nineveh."

"So all right. I'll go to Nineveh!" Jonah prayed from inside the big fishes belly, "just get me out of this smelly fish."

Gaaruuuup!

The big fish vomited Jonah out onto the beach.

"Go to Nineveh!" God said to Jonah.

"I'm going! I'm going!" shouted Jonah.

So Jonah went to Nineveh. He went right to the middle of the city and said, "God says to stop doing bad things. If you don't, God will destroy this city."

All the people of Nineveh stopped and listened to Jonah.

Even the king said, "he's right, you know. We haven't been living in God's way. Let's try to live the way God wants us to, and maybe God won't destroy us."

So God didn't destroy Nineveh. That made Jonah very angry.

"I go through all this trouble and you don't even destroy Nineveh," said Jonah.

He sat down just outside of the city. "I'm just going to sit here, God. I might die, too. Then you'll be sorry."

So Jonah sat down. The sun came out and it made Jonah feel hot. His stomach felt sick. "I think I'm going to throw up. Maybe I'll die here from the hot sun. Then God will be sorry." God made a plant come up out of the ground. It grew very quickly. Soon Jonah was sitting in its shade.

"Ah, that's nice," said Jonah. "The sun was really hot. That's a lovely plant."

Then, just as quickly, the plant died. A hot wind came up and the sun was hot again.

Now Jonah was really angry at God. "Why did you kill that plant, God?" yelled Jonah. "I needed the shade. What are you trying to do to me?"

"You liked that plant?" God asked.

"Yes, of course I'd like that plant. What do you think?" grumped Jonah.

"So!" said God. "You like that plant. But you didn't plant it. You didn't help it grow. Don't you think I care about the people of Nineveh? There are many people in Nineveh. And lots of animals. I made them the way I made you. Shouldn't I care about them, too?"

Reflection

Laura:

I was challenged by this story in some of the same ways that the story of Noah challenged me...

Here we see the same understanding – same perception of God –
a vengeful, angry... kind of a bully God...

a God that's ready to turf an entire group of people because they weren't living in a good way.

Hearing the story as Charlie told it... a story taken from a children's Bible...

you can hear for sure that thread of God's threat to take out the Ninevites...

and yet, looking over a Sunday school lesson for this story –

the theme and lesson suggestions were about God's persistent love –

God's persistent love of Jonah - even though Jonah tried to run away
and God's persistent love of the Ninevites, which we can see by how
quickly God forgave them for their bad behavior once they repented.

This is a great theme... a lovely theme...

but I think children must still be left with this sense of God being rather mean-spirited...

and I know many adults who carry that theme into their adult life.

We see this when someone believes that a tragedy in their life or in the world is because of God's punishment for something they - or someone else - have done.

I've heard this expressed with respect to sudden deaths, natural disasters or something like – a car accident, for example.

So... yesterday I called my partner a jerk and today I fell flat on my face walking home from the grocery store... I must have made God angry.

Cause and effect... I've done something wrong and now God is mad and throwing a bit of a hissy fit.

So, as with Noah, it's important to understand the context of that time...

how people then understood God and understood God's relationship to humanity...

and then to look deeper into the story and wonder about our own understanding of God and what we might take from this story...

Jordan:

Ok, so let's dig into some of the background of this story.

In the story of Jonah, the city of Nineveh represents the Empire of Assyria... the capital city of that Empire. We know from biblical history that there was a time when the Assyrians were an occupying force in Israel... they were the oppressors. Israel lived in a state of tension and conflict with the Assyrians who were the bigger, stronger neighbour of whom the Israelites lived in fear.

This casts a whole new light on God saying to Jonah: "Listen, I'm really upset with Nineveh because of its corruption. I want you to go and tell them that I'm upset with them."

Oh sure... Go tell the big neighbourhood bully, "God's mad at you." That's not going to go well for Jonah!

I imagine he's terrified... But also, he doesn't want to go and warn the Ninevites that they are upsetting God, because Jonah wants nothing more than for the Ninevites to be in trouble. Nothing about going to Nineveh appeals to Jonah.

That's one thing I found really interesting as I was reading this. But as I read the whole trajectory of the story, I see that it represents a seismic shift in Israel's understanding of God, from a sense of a tribal God – a God who was concerned only with the Hebrew people, who resided in the land of Israel (Jonah thinks as he leaves Israel and goes to Tarshish that God can't see him, because God is just with the people of Israel)... that's this tribal notion of God that we know existed for the early Hebrew people... but we see in this story a change away from that, to a notion of God as universal – a God who is concerned with all persons and all nations, not just one nation and one people.

That was not an easy shift to make. It was profound of Israel – our faith ancestors – to give us this understanding... but the story of Jonah shows us how hard that shift was for people to make.

So, we can understand Jonah as a kind of stand-in for the people of Israel, and we see their reluctance to embrace God's love for other nations, particularly for their opponents, the people that they're in conflict with. We see how there's a sense of offense that God would actually be merciful towards those that hurt them... their enemies. It really

reveals, I think, how painful it is to allow our old, limiting, but deeply cherished ideals to die... in order to allow something new and more expansive, a truth about God that is greater – to allow that to be born in us. You have to let go of the one in order to have the other... but that is not easy.

So, Jonah's journey is the journey of the people of Israel... it's their story... but it is also our story. I know from my life, and I'm sure you all know from your life, that letting go of those cherished beliefs and attitudes and actions in order, in effect, to be born into something bigger and greater... while it is life-giving, it is not fun... and we don't want to do it.

This story is a beautiful representation of that for us.

So that's something I heard in this story.

Laura:

Okay... so that's really helpful for me to understand a little better another question this passage raises for me....

Jonah's response to the call of God to do this thing... to pass on God's message to the Ninevites.

What does he do?

He says "Nope.. can't do that.. don't wanna do that, I'm outta here".

Its only after he's been tossed off a boat, has been swallowed by a giant fish and has spent those 3 days in the smelly belly of that fish that he finally relents "Fine... I'll go."

He does this thing God has asked him to do and we can feel his grumpiness and resentment – his self-pity even – the entire time.

Do we really want to follow Jonah's example here?

Or can we imagine ourselves following God... possibly doing things we really aren't keen on doing... and maybe even doing them out of a sense of obligation – obligation isn't a bad thing, I don't think...

but rather than an obligation that comes out of fear of punishment or losing God's love – an obligation that comes out of gratitude...

gratitude for the radical love of God that continues to surround us even if we say "Nope, not going to do it".

Responding to God's love and God's call to live that love in the world

– often in ways that don't necessarily feel comfortable –

feels absolutely essential in my commitment to live in God's way

– not to earn anything, but in response to everything I believe God desires for us... for all of humanity and creation.

How different would this story have been if Jonah believed fully in God's immense love for him... and understood that love as being for all God's people, even the ones that Jonah didn't like so much?

Prayers

And now we gather our hearts together in prayer... opening ourselves to God's abundant love and grace – filling our hearts and holding our minds.

We begin our prayers... with prayers of gratitude

For life...

For love...

For joy...

For the many sweet blessings that fill our days.

We pray gratitude especially for your presence within and around us.

Especially in our more challenging times...

Times of grief...

Of hurt...

Of anger...

Of frustration...

Thank you lifting us up... for holding us tight... for guiding us gently forward.

We turn our prayers to others now...

We pray for all your people,

Especially for those who are lonely...

Who are sad...

Who struggle with internal demons...

Those who feel caught in despair.

May they feel a crack of hope move through their hearts

May they feel the whisper, the gentle touch of your love.

WE offer all of these prayers to you, O God, knowing that you hear these prayers and all of the prayers held in our hearts. Thank you for hearing our call and for answering in love.

And now we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught...

Blessing

And now may we go from this time of worship

May we be inspired to open ourselves to new ways of seeing you..

of feeling your presence...

of learning your wisdom...

of living your truth...

May we see the world –see all of creation.. all of your people...

and see ourselves... as you see us – beloved. Amen.