

"BOOK OF FAITH" JOURNEY

CURRENT SERIES: "Top 10 Stories & Themes of the Old Testament"

Week 9 (Began Sunday, November 15) -- "Jonah: Much More Than A Fish Story"

Week 10 (Began Sunday, November 22) -- "Daniel: Apocalyptic Theology, and The Hope For A Messiah"

WEEK 9 -- "Jonah: Much More Than A Fish Story"

Reading: The Book of Jonah (easy to read in one sitting, pretty short, only four brief chapters)

IT'S ALL ABOUT GRACE... Sometimes people talk about the Old Testament and the Old Testament God as if they are different from the New Testament and the God of Jesus. Or, it sounds like Jesus came along and talked God into behaving for a change, finally, after all those centuries of hellfire and brimstone. The story of Jonah (along with so many others in the Hebrew Scriptures) remind us that GRACE is God's Way, and is nothing new. Jesus didn't start the idea of God's grace. Jesus just reminded Jews and the world what God was like, by showing us a life of Grace. As some people say: "In Jesus, we see what a God-intoxicated life looks like." Indeed, Jesus is one of a long line of preachers and leaders and prophets who constantly call God's people back to the God of Grace -- away from a relationship of fear and guilt and judgment and selfishness, and back to a relationship of trust, forgiveness, faithfulness and unconditional love. The question is worthy of reflection: Do we find it so hard to live and love God's Way, that we begin to construct an angry and spiteful God in order to justify our own unlovingness? In any case, the variety of God images in Scripture highlight our "Struggle With Grace", which is the basis of the Jonah Story.

The parable of Jonah is really THE story of God and God's people. Like so many others, we see ourselves so well in Jonah that it can make us laugh and cry at the same time.

+ God asks Jonah to go preach the renewal and transformation of God's Way to Nineveh, but Jonah refuses and goes the other way. God is displeased, disappointed.

+ Jonah finds himself in a nasty spot, the belly of a fish. Jonah praises God, humbles himself, asks forgiveness, and promises to do better. He repents and seeks reconciliation with God.

+ God forgives Jonah, and again asks him to go to Nineveh and preach the good news of renewal and transformation by living God's Way. This time Jonah goes.

+ Nineveh is transformed by God's Grace... and this really ticks Jonah off! He can't believe that the very grace he just depended on to get out of the fish's belly is also a free gift for those nasty, undeserving Ninevites. How dare they! How dare God! Jonah wishes he were dead, rather than deal with a God of Grace who loves Nineveh as much as God loves Jonah.

+ God asks Jonah, "Do you still not get it Jonah?" We all depend on God's Grace, and that's just how God is. Jonah is supposed to regard Nineveh the same way God regards Jonah.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY:

+ Have you ever said "no" to doing something that you felt or thought God wanted you to do? Were there any consequences for you or for anyone else?

+ Have you ever refused to "do the right thing" just because you didn't want to pay the price or suffer the consequences, or take the risk?

+ Have you ever said "yes" to doing the right thing, or to serving God, even though it was difficult? What were the results or consequences?

+ Have you ever been frustrated by God's wide embrace of Grace that includes even your enemies? Have you ever been asked to include people you don't approve of or don't like in a circle of friendship, or as your equals? What do we do about that? What are our options?

+ When someone tries to limit God's grace, what do they think are the reasons for, or perceived benefits of doing so?

+ When we include others, and treat others the way God treats us, what are the benefits and consequences?

WEEK 10 -- "Daniel: Apocalyptic Theology, and The Hope For A Messiah"

Reading: Daniel Chapter 7

UNDERSTANDING APOCALYPTIC SCRIPTURE...

Daniel is one of the last Old Testament books written, leading up to the Intertestamental period -- that time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. In this book we see the growing hope for, and the emerging image of the Jewish Messiah. This would be a new, powerful leader who would deliver Israel from a long history of insignificance and oppression, and finally restore the Kingdom of Israel to its rightful place as a prominent nation in the world, much like their experience during the "Golden Era" under King David. Apocalyptic writing is symbolic writing, full of images that require interpretation and a key to decode. The most apocalyptic New Testament writing is, of course, the book of Revelation. These writings are generally written by and for a people with little to no hope, with little to no say in how they are suffering oppression, and with little reason to believe that things are going to get better anytime soon. But apocalyptic scripture is written to inspire hope and to promise people that God is faithful, and that a better tomorrow is coming. It is no wonder that they dreamt of the day when God would act powerfully, overthrow the oppressor, and set everything right in favor of the ones who presently are suffering (and of course, against the ones who are currently in control). God was storing up anger, wrath, and vengeance, and would eventually explode onto the scene with a mighty display of power and might. And God help those who aren't on God's side when that happens!

So, it is no wonder that people didn't really accept Jesus as the Messiah. John the Baptizer, the prophet and preacher under whom Jesus apparently studied for a time, had an apocalyptic bent. He encouraged people to change their ways, to watch for God's arrival, and he warned those who weren't in God's good graces that they would regret it. The time was short, so make amends while you still can!

There are elements of apocalyptic thinking within the body of Jesus' teachings. That makes sense, since he did spend some time with John the Baptizer at the Jordan River. However, by the end of John the Baptizer's life, Jesus had pursued a different path, to the point where John was asking, "Are you really the ONE, or should we hope and look for another?" (Matthew 11:2-6 and Luke 7:18-23) By the time of his confrontation with Jerusalem, Jesus had apparently divorced himself from the major tenets of "Apocalypse School" and had also refused to accept the mantle of "Messiah King" as far as any political power and ambition were concerned. For those who sincerely hoped for the Messiah, Jesus was another in a long list of heart-rending, gut-wrenching disappointments.

Some Key Differences Between John the Baptizer's Message and Jesus's Message:

- + John said the Kingdom (Reign) of God was coming soon; Jesus said it was at hand, already in our midst, a present reality.
- + John said God was going to arrive from somewhere else, impose God's wrath and set things right by force and violence; Jesus said God was like a loving parent who is always present, and whose love draws all people into God's embrace.
- + John said God will be noticeable when God arrives; Jesus claimed that God is noticeable when God's people love one another, and that God is present in everyday, simple acts of love, generosity and compassion, like sharing a meal together with friends, family and strangers... God is close, always present, and lives within us and through us.
- + John said wayward sinners would be in trouble when God showed up; Jesus claimed that God sent him particularly to seek out and to love and rescue the sinners and the wayward ones.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY...

- + Have you ever been on the losing end, the short end of the stick, and wished that the God of the Apocalypse would show up and deal with those who have hurt you? Can you understand, perhaps, why a poor, powerless and oppressed people would make such a wish and plead to God for relief, and even imagine what God might do to the oppressor?
- + What does Jesus ask his followers to do about "enemies" and those who cause his followers to suffer? It doesn't sound very apocalyptic, does it?
- + How do we experience God's presence, love and assurance when things look really bad? Where do we turn to see, know and trust that God is with us?
- + What can you and I do to make God real for people who have hit rock bottom? In what ways does that impact us?

We hope you have enjoyed this Top 10 Journey through the Old Testament as much as we have. It truly is amazing to see the roots of our faith through the lively witness of our ancestors. And, this journey helps us better understand the context in which Jesus lived, taught and carried out his mission.

NOTES ON WHAT'S AHEAD ON THE JOURNEY....

Our Book of Faith Journey continues now with the four Sundays of Advent, November 29, December 6, 13 and 20. During the next four Sundays, we will each have the opportunity to experience one "Lessons & Carols" on Sunday mornings, and we will hear messages about "THE TOP THREE CHRISTMAS STORIES." Here's a quick glimpse:

+ The earliest New Testament writings (The Gospel According To Mark, dated around 70 A.D., and the letters of Paul, dated around 50-65 A.D.) don't mention anything about the birth of Jesus. His birth must have happened somewhere around our years of 6 to 4 B.C. (There was a miscalculation in deriving our modern calendar.) Apparently it was a non-factor among the earliest Christians. But Matthew (around 80 A.D.), then Luke (around 85 A.D.), and then John (around 90-95 A.D.) each describe the Nativity of Jesus in a special and unique way. None of their stories are the same, and yet, they all give us glimpses of why they thought Jesus's adult life was one-of-a-kind. In each of three messages, we'll look at the three accounts separately and see what each gospel editor was trying to express by these TOP THREE CHRISTMAS STORIES.

I'll send out the "Letter From Jesus About Christmas" -- that was part of my Sunday sermon -- by email later in the week.

Blessings and Peace as we journey together, and Happy Thanksgiving!

Pastors Charlie and Jay