

Study Guide for January 21, 2018

Theme: Characteristics of God

Readings: Jonah 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 7 :29-31; Mark 1:14-20; Psalm 62: 5-12

As we move into the third week after Epiphany, and begin to prepare our hearts for the upcoming Lenten season, we are given readings that take us to the beginning of God's message for us. If I were to sum it all up into one word, it would be: "Repent." The dictionary defines this as a feeling or expression of sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin. For me, sincerity is key; expressed in the idea that "God forgives those with a contrite heart." Contrition is often regarded as the first step towards reconciliation with God. It consists of repentance for all the stuff you've done that harms yours and other's relationship with God. Christians hold to the truth that redemption (and the salvation it provides) is possible by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. This is our Good News.

Jonah is more than a story about a man who reluctantly does what God has asked him to do. It's about a nation that repents from their sinful ways and returns to God. There is so much debate (and rightly so) about whether it is serious history or salacious satire, and if you read it as a literalist you wind up losing a lot of its real message, or good news, that give us insight into God's character. Jonah is not so much a prophecy as it is a story about human sin and God's grace. This reluctant prophet speaks to us, just as he did to the Ninevites, with a message we don't always want to hear (or do): Repent!

1 Corinthians continues Paul's pastoral mission and builds upon last week's theme of sexual immorality. In all the different pastoral pieces that are found within this letter, Paul encourages the Christians to remain as they are. Presuming they've already repented like the Ninevites, Paul reminds us all to "eyes on the prize" for God's judgment is drawing near.

Mark jumps right into Jesus' ministry, sparing us from any backstory. Why? Perhaps because the greatest message in this author's eyes is not the mere fact that the Messiah has come but that his arrival demands action: Repent. You might notice that Jesus doesn't just call us to follow him, but to do so with a purpose. Mark declares the fishermen heard Jesus speak and they, like the Ninevites who heard Jonah, immediately stopped doing what they were doing to go and do God's will. Jonah, Paul, and Mark all agree there is an immediacy to the good news that they bring. This rings true today as well. God is, was, and always will be here among us. We must respond accordingly.

Psalm 62 is like a confession from a repenting soul that has put his trust in God alone. It reads like a personal testimony given in the midst of a church service, but it speaks to us all in that it reminds us in whom we are to put our trust and our faith. In God alone we find our peace, and power and overcome the anxiety and distress that others cause us to feel. And so it is in God alone that we are able to find our salvation from all that we have done wrong. God's love is steadfast, and faithful; "all power belongs to God" and it is God alone who will "repay to all according to their work."

Read: The entire story of Jonah; Matthew 12:38-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32

Try not to focus on the Sunday School story of the whale, the scientific contradictions, or the idea that God is so vain that he will destroy those who don't obey him. Instead step into the shoes of Jonah and look for God's persistence, God's responsiveness, and universality of God's love and grace all at work within your own life story.

Q: How do you relate to the story of Jonah, and where do you see similarity in yourself?

Q: How do the New Testament authors use Jonah's story to connect with Jesus?

Q: What is God saying to you in this passage?

Read: 1 Corinthians 7

As you read, keep in mind verse 31, "For the present form of this world is passing away." While we do not know when Jesus will return, God is preparing the world for that time. I think it's safe to say that all believers play a major role in helping God achieve this.

Q: How might Jesus be speaking to you to your heart so that you might be a part of God's world while living in this world?

Read: Mark 1:14-20

Mark's abrupt beginning jumps right in to Jesus' ministry and proclamation of the gospel he has been called to bring (Notice the not so subtle difference between Jonah?). He uses a powerful metaphor that is repeated sixty-six times in the NT, "the Kingdom of God," which sets his ministry apart from all those other prophets before him. Jesus declares this time of God has come. And Mark's gospel will proceed to illustrate how liberation, restoration, and reconciliation are already happening in Jesus' story of healing miracles, the casting out of demons, and by his teachings. But for now,

Q: Jesus begins by proclaiming the "good news," what does that mean to you?

Q: God speaks to us in words, and calls us into action, how will you respond?

Q: What is God saying to you in this passage?

Slow Read Psalm 62: Imagine you were the ancient poet who wrote these words. As you pour out your soul to the Lord, how does God respond to you? Focus your prayers and meditation on a word or phrase that personally speaks to you, and make it part of your daily prayers this week.

Prayer: Lord God, to your mercy and grace I confess that I have sinned against you in thought, word and deed; by what I have and have not done, to others and to myself. Please forgive me and redeem me of my wrongdoing, and empower me with your Spirit so that I might stay focused on what you have called me to do. Amen.