

Sermon

„ A Second Time“

OPENER

I don't know if you've ever had the unfortunate experience of losing your luggage? Maybe your suitcase didn't make it onto your plane and you had to wear the same clothes while you waited for your case to turn up. That has thankfully never happened to me (yet), but hearing the stories from other people I do worry that it could happen. And so I pack differently. Sometimes Christian and I split our things across our two suitcases, so that if one suitcase goes missing, we at least each have half of our belongings. Or I pack a few essentials in my hand luggage.

If I could trust the airlines to always deliver my luggage to the right place at the right time, I wouldn't need to split my luggage.

You might not have absolute faith in airlines, and respond accordingly with splitting your luggage or taking out an insurance. But how do we respond to God?

RECAP & INTRODUCE THEME

Last week our theme was listening, and we remembered Samuel who was called in the night and eventually realised it was God who was calling him.

And when God calls, we have the opportunity to respond.

Call and response.

That's our theme for this week. How are we going to respond to God's call?

I don't know if you're an "immediately" kind of person, like the fishermen-disciples, or if you're a "second time" kind of person, like Jonah. Or even a "fourth time" kind of person like young Samuel.

The good news is that even if God calls you a hundred times before you respond, he is full of grace. As the hymn goes, “slow to chide and swift to bless”.

It’s never too late to join in God’s song of good news and abundant life.

REPENTANCE

As I studied these two passages, I noticed several parallels and similarities:

- In each story there is a call of God, and a response from people.
- And both are stories about repentance

Let’s look first at the gospel reading. Do you realise that in the reading from Mark 1 we heard Jesus’ very first sermon?! It has two sections. First of all, a proclamation: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is near!” And then an invitation: “Repent, and believe in the good news.”

Some of you might love Jesus’ sermon – it’s very short and to the point! But you might also ponder what on earth he means. It is a little cryptic. There are not many words in his sermon, but their meaning is difficult to understand, especially for us today.

But what we do know is that these words are dangerous. These words have the power to shake up society. Because, we see in verse 14, when John the Baptist preached “repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, he was arrested.

So what is it about repentance that is so important? What is it about repentance that draws city people out into the desert, or prompts fishermen to leave their nets? What is it about repentance that makes rulers send in the police?

As we heard in the all-age activity, repentance means to turn around, to reorient yourself. It means to think again, to change your mind. Very simply put, it means to change and be transformed.

And I think that is one of the reasons why we are often slow to respond to God, and we require multiple calls and invitations, before we respond.

It's because repentance is, by definition, life-changing. It's a hold-nothing-back, all-in calling.

Jonah walked into the very centre of a city of evil-doers and proclaimed God's judgement. He was all-in.

Simon and Andrew, and James and John left their businesses, along with their tools, investments, family and colleagues, and followed Jesus. They were all-in.

This calling to repentance starts to sound daunting!

Are you ready to be a changed and changing person? Are you ready to change your thinking; to reorient the way you live your life?! Maybe now is the time...?

For Simon and Andrew, James and John, the timing was right. For Jonah, the timing was right. For Samuel, the timing was right. God's timing. God called them and they responded; immediately, a second time, a fourth time. Because they could sense that the kingdom of God has come near.

But let's remember these people were certainly not perfect. If you read the whole story, the disciples didn't get it all to start with. And Jonah was half-hearted at best.

There is a wonderful gem in the Jonah passage that blew me away when I discovered it. We are all familiar with the part of the story when the people of Nineveh unexpectedly repented: they turned from their evil ways, they changed their lives. But later in the passage, in verse 10, God repents too! God "changed his mind" and did not bring calamity upon the Ninevites as he had said he would.

God repents! And to be honest, Jonah finds this very difficult to accept. Jonah prefers to remain judgemental of the Ninevites; and he gets bitter about God's change of heart.

Jonah's story may have been very dramatic. And maybe some of you can identify with him. But the real call of the book of Jonah is to be more

like the God who sent him; the one who believes in second chances; the one who doesn't give up issuing the invitation, even when the response isn't what was hoped.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US PRACTICALLY?

So what does this mean for us practically?

The message is so simple and yet so deeply significant. How do we repent? How can we change our thinking and reorient our lives?

For some it may be a sudden moment when everything suddenly changes. For most of us, I believe it is a lifelong process of transformation.

Experience tells us that it is almost impossible to alter your opinions and lifestyle without some deep conviction or significant experience that causes us to reassess what we previously believed. Sometimes such events happen to us. Like becoming dependent on a carer, or having to work with someone who is very different from you. Sometimes, we must take the hard path and put ourselves in situations outside our comfort zone.

Meeting new people can do this. Experiencing a new culture can do this.

That's why our diverse church community is such a blessing. We get to experience and appreciate a wide variety of worship styles, food, music, traditions. And discover God is there in the middle of it all.

That's one of the things I value about being on the Coffee&More team. I get to interact with people whose lives are different from mine and who may hold different views from me - after just two weeks of Coffee&More I've already had conversations around the table about art, spirituality, the end of the world, politics, poverty, miscarriage and football. And I was reminded not to judge people too quickly.

There are many ways that can be a positive influence on our worldview, that cause us to rethink and take a different view. I wonder what has caused you to rethink in your life?

CONCLUSION & RESPONSE

Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news"

This is God's call to us:

Repent.

God calls us to think again. To not jump to quick conclusions. To reassess our prejudices. To seek to see the situation in a different way; to gain a new perspective; to choose to think kindly, to love beyond what comes naturally. To dig deep and discover mercy. To become a new person, a new creation. Growing into God's likeness day by day.

Jesus says, "Follow me".

This is God's call to us:

Follow.

God calls us to follow him. All-in. Not looking back. Following the one who is absolutely trustworthy, the one who is love, full of grace and truth. Following and making disciples who make disciples. Passing on the invitation; extending hospitality to strangers; seeking the good of the city. Again and again, not giving up on one another and the community around us.

What about you? The kingdom of God has come near. How will you respond? It's never too late to join in God's song of good news and abundant life.