

Mark 1:14-20 - Revised Standard Version

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

¹⁶And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zeb’edee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zeb’edee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

A CHANGE OF MIND

“Consciously forming ourselves through some method of discipleship is both preparation for and answer to God’s call.”

Today I want to talk about discipleship and transformation. More specifically, I want to explore the idea of consciously guiding ourselves into a state where we allow ourselves to be formed by God as we follow the path Jesus demonstrated for us.

Jonah and the Change of Mind

In today’s scripture reading, we find Jonah, just after he has endured three days in the dark, slimy, smelly belly of the fish where he has undergone an amazing transformation. After that, he is spewed out on the shore and makes his way to Nineveh to warn them that they will be destroyed if they don’t change their ways.

The ancient city of Nineveh was a part of the Assyrian Empire and it was located at the site of the present day city of Mosul in Iraq. It is a long way from the sea. It must have taken many weeks for Jonah to travel from where the fish coughed him up to Nineveh. Scripture says that the city was so large that it took three days for a person to walk across the breadth of the city itself. It makes me think of Los Angeles, where I guess it would take about three days to walk from the coast to the Inland Empire. Now picture Jonah walking through the hot city streets. Scripture says, “**Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he cried, “Yet forty days, and Nin’evah shall be overthrown!”** (Jonah 3:4)

We don't get any more elaboration on that, just a proclamation of doom for the city of Nineveh for its wicked ways. Can you imagine Jonah saying that in downtown L.A.? or Detroit, or Times Square, or Tiananmen Square, or any other city for that matter? How would he be received today? Who would listen? The scripture says, “**And the people of Nin'evah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.**” From the king to the beggar, old, young, men, women, lame and fit, lawyers and brick layers, the whole city repented and changed their ways. What caused this to happen? We can imagine a few wicked people changing their ways — but not a whole city full of miscreants suddenly turning around?

Finally, the reading today tells us that, “**When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.**” So we have a story in which Jonah changed his mind, then Nineveh, then finally God, who decides not to destroy the city. While God is working very directly in Jonah's life, this story made me question how God may have been working with Nineveh before Jonah arrived. We don't get that side of the story. What could get a whole city to change their ways in an instant? Can you imagine that today?

Super-Cooling, Super-Heating and Catalyst

This change in the city of Nineveh made me think of water once again. We have been speaking lately about water and how it can form different shapes depending on how it is treated. Certain positive words or phrases like “thank you” can influence water to transform into beautiful crystals while negative phrases like, “you fool!” can influence water to form misshapen patterns. (I have placed the book *Hidden Messages In Water* in Bailey Hall for anyone to look at). There is another interesting thing that water can do. Under certain conditions, water can be super-cooled. That is, liquid water can be brought well below the freezing point of 32° and remain in its liquid state. You can then take a (plastic) bottle of super-cooled water and strike it against your hand or a table and watch the ice crystals form until the entire bottle of liquid turns into solid ice. It happens in just seconds. It is a fun trick and a good physical example of how conditions can be just right for a major change to take place and all that is needed is a catalyst. Nineveh, it seems, was just such a place. Scripture doesn't say how, maybe the people of the city were aware of their wickedness in some way. Maybe they had begun to notice the results of the poor way they were treating each other and that their society was in an advanced state of moral

decay. Who knows? But they were a people ready for change. Jonah didn't have to say much, but he did have to say something and that made all the difference.

We are much more familiar with opposite examples of the Jonah story. This is like a crowd waiting in line on a cold morning outside a store on Black Friday, eager for holiday shopping sales, full of desire for stuff and fear that there won't be enough. There are limited supplies on the shelves. One rude word or one dispute over the last child's toy on the shelf could lead to a riot, a stampede, injuries, or worse. Or consider a crowd of angry protesters facing off against the police here or abroad. One violent move by either side can cause the whole scene to erupt. These situations are full of negative tension and could be likened to the phenomenon of super-heated water. In this instance, water has been heated past the boiling point, say, in a microwave. When this happens, a simple disturbance like dropping a teabag into the water can cause it all to burst into steam immediately, risking some serious burns.

We all may have experienced these types of super-heated or super-cooled moments in our own lives, when conditions are just right for a big transformation to happen:

Perhaps a number of things have been bothering you all day, there are deadlines and family matters and then the car didn't start and you spilled your coffee on your lap. You've been unsettled all day and then someone says the wrong thing to you and you just snap and take it out on them. Afterwards, you may feel justified or horrified by the outburst, but if you think about it, you can trace the series of events that led you to the boiling point.

Or perhaps you've been carrying around sorrow upon sorrow. You've been soldiering on and taking care of business all day, all week, all month and all year, but the grief you feel has been welling up within you, silently. Then something happens, you see a movie, or hear a song or a friend stops by and simply asks how you're doing and the damn breaks and the tears just flow.

We can all understand how something can be forming within us, or within a group of people and then there is a catalyst, a word, a moment and things just seem to change all at once, but there has been a pre-formation of sorts, like the super-cooling or super-heating of water and the conditions are just right for something to happen. We need to think about these pre-formations, these

edifices that build up within us, often unconsciously. What is building up in our inner lives at this time? What conditions are we creating, are they ones of love and forgiveness, or anger and resentment?

Formation

I want to turn now to our gospel reading from today. In the gospel of Mark, it says, **“¹⁶And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he [Jesus] saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him.** (Mark 1:16-18) Jesus did not say, “believe in me,” or “worship me” or anything so lofty. The call to discipleship was a simple, “follow me.” That call and the disciples’ subsequent act of following is an act of trust, curiosity, courage and reaching out towards mystery. “Following” is an activity that involves your whole being, feet moving, face forward, the mind, will and interest fully engaged.

We know the disciples stopped the work they were doing and followed. Discipleship is following. “Disciple” shares the same root as “discipline,” a Latin word “discere” which means “to learn.” Discipleship implies a process, a journey, an activity that you undergo or undertake, but which changes and forms you in the process. It is part conscious, part unconscious, but it is not static. It is movement – in body, mind and soul.

Before Jesus called his disciples, they had been fishermen. They had performed daily tasks, probably since their youth, mending nets, guiding boats upon the water, paying attention to weather patterns and water behavior. Their jobs had given them lessons in the theater of nature and their work fed others. They were disciplined by their jobs and formed into capable workers. Jesus called them because they knew how to work and apply themselves to their task. They had been formed, in a sense, by their simple adherence to their jobs.

My brother was living in France when he was seventeen. He didn’t know a word of the language. He was working with severely mentally and physically handicapped people in a L’Arche community and getting by mostly on hand signals. He was there for many months, doing the best he could, but not feeling like he could communicate well at all. Then, one day, he spoke to my mother on the phone. She began speaking to him in French and, without realizing it, he

answered and they carried on a conversation entirely in French before he realized what had just happened. An ability to understand and speak the language had been forming within him slowly, until all of a sudden something just clicked and a light came on.

Another illustration involves a man we know named Jake. Jake had been an apprentice carpenter for several years, building houses, putting up timber frames, and installing roofs, doors and windows. He had been doing all the individual skills and tasks that are involved in building a house, and had gotten good at them. One day he was looking at a house he was working on and in a flash, as if he was struck by lightning, he saw the whole structure in all its parts and also in its wholeness, from every beam and joist down to the minutia. The whole thing lit up and made sense like a geometric puzzle illuminated before his eyes and he realized the entire part to whole relationship. Something just clicked.

Jake and my brother had both undergone a time of formation, a time where the language of words, the language of carpentry was becoming known to them until a moment when it crystalized into a greater understanding that appeared out of the conditions which had been quietly forming all along.

Passing Forms

It is good to be aware, as much as we can, of the processes that are forming us. The things we practice, or pay attention to — our disciplines. What are we learning? Some things are beneficial, like learning a skill or a language. Some are harmful, like allowing ourselves to become obsessed with material items or slowly allowing anger to simmer within us like super-heated water, ready to explode.

I find that the world is constantly trying to get us to con-form to its ways. Advertising is always telling us that life will be better if we buy more stuff. We are told to outsource our health to the doctor, our education to the teacher, our nutrition to the grocer, our mental health to the psychologist, our spiritual formation to gurus or, heaven forbid, preachers. Our political opinions and world views are heavily influenced by mass media. If we are not consciously and actively choosing what or who to follow, then it is likely we are unconsciously following someone or something else, and to what ends?

The people of Nineveh had been conformed to the ways of the world and needed to be recalled to God's ways. Perhaps we are not so different from them.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that, **“the form of this world is passing away.”**(1 Cor 7:31) All of our Black Fridays and tall buildings, our wars and our worries, our Nineveh cities and notions big and small will someday pass. They are of this world. What remains? What are the eternal forms?

Eternal Forms

When the disciples are called by Jesus, they do not know what they are getting into. They simply follow. Their formation takes place both consciously, and unconsciously. Consciously, they hear the good news, witness healings and miracles and even perform healings themselves. Unconsciously, as they journey towards the cross with Jesus they are preparing, without knowing it, for the Holy Spirit to enter them. They followed Jesus on his ministry. They were part of something that I am quite sure they did not fully understand until much later. For them, I imagine it was like all of a sudden realizing they knew a new language, or could see the house in its entirety and its parts all at once. Like water crystalizing in an instant after being super-cooled, they followed and were transformed, men and women alike, from people of flesh and blood into people of spirit. May we all do as much by following the Way, The Truth and The Life. Amen.