

## This week's Scripture - Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> September - Proper 20

### Jonah 3.10-4.11; Psalm 145.1-8; Philippians 1.21-30; Matthew 20.1-16

**Jonah 3.10-4.11.** The reading from the Hebrew Scriptures are the final verses of Jonah. The prophet, after first running from God's call, went to Nineveh and did what he was supposed to do. He prophesied the demise of the great city, but destruction did not come, because the people repented. Nineveh's citizens mourned for what they had done, fasted, and wore sackcloth. The king even ordered the animals to be clothed for mourning. God witnessed their repentance, and God changed their mind. However, Jonah became angry with God because Jonah knew God was merciful, and he came all that way for "nothing." But God questioned Jonah's anger, if it was right for Jonah to be angry that God chose to show mercy instead of punishment. God provided a bush to give Jonah shade, but then called forth a worm that attacked the bush, so it withered. Jonah threw a tantrum fit for a toddler: "It is better for me to die than to live." Jonah was so upset about losing the bush which wasn't there until God brought it forth. Jonah didn't care at all for the people until he was given the message to prophesy against them, and then became upset when God won't destroy them. The message of Jonah is very human: we want others to get what we think they deserve, instead of the incredible mercy that God shows all of us.

**Psalm 145,** a psalm of praise to God, is an acrostic poem with each line beginning in order of the Hebrew alphabet. The first eight verses begin with an individual blessing God, praising God for God's works throughout the generations. The psalmist meditates on all of God's wonderful works, committing to declaring them out loud and celebrating God's goodness.

**Philippians 1.21-30.** The Epistle selection begins a series following Philippians. Paul's letter to the church in Philippi was written when he was in prison. Paul begins this section of the letter that he lives for Christ, and if he dies, he gains Christ. Though Paul would prefer to be with Christ in that moment, he will continue to proclaim the Good News as long as he is alive. Paul is isolated from the believers while he is in prison, yet he declares that he remains with them, hopeful that one day he will be able to celebrate in person with the church. He calls upon the Philippians to live their lives worthy of the Gospel. Part of the background of Paul's letter is that other teachers had come, teaching that believers must continue to follow the practice of circumcision and other traditions, but Paul encourages the church to continue to live in faithfulness to the Gospel. The church is in the same struggle Paul has faced and they will prevail in Christ, in one spirit and in one mind.

**Matthew 20:1-16.** Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of heaven - He compared the reign of heaven to a landowner who went out to hire laborers for his vineyard, hiring throughout the day, until the evening. He told them he would pay them whatever was right. The owner of the vineyard told his manager at the end of the day to pay the workers, beginning with those who arrived last in the evening, and all the way to the first laborers he hired, but the manager paid them all the same—the usual daily wage. The ones who came first complained, for they worked all day in the heat while those who only worked an hour got the same pay as them. But the landowner said he did nothing wrong—they agreed to work for the usual daily wage, and the landowner gets to choose what to give. The landowner then asks a question: are the workers complaining about the landowner's choices of what to do with his money, or are they just jealous because of his generosity? Jesus concludes with the summary that the last will be first and the first will be last.

**Reflection:** Life isn't fair. It wasn't fair for Jonah, who did not want to go to Nineveh and prophesy. Then, after the ordeal of trying to run away to Tarshish, being thrown overboard and swallowed by a giant sea creature, staying there for a few days before he was spit up on shore, Jonah finally did what God wanted—and for what? God saved the people anyway.

It wasn't fair for the laborers who worked all day in Jesus' parable, because in the end, they were paid the exact same amount as those who only worked an hour. But the kingdom of God isn't about fairness. It's about God's abundant, extravagant love that saved entire cities, including all the animals. It's about God's wild idea that everyone ought to have enough. If you need a daily wage to live by, then you earn a daily wage, no matter when you find the job. Whether you've lived your whole life in faithfulness, or only at an old age recognize what God desires and offers for this life, God loves you.

The kingdom of God isn't about fairness, it's about God who has enough love for everybody and then some. The abundance of God's love means that we have an abundance of resources in this world to help others if we choose to live into God's ways. If we choose to turn the world upside down, where the first are last and the last are first, we'll hear complaining, grumbling, yelling, and even violence in response to this extravagant love. There will be so many who don't want it, even if the reign of God means everyone has enough. We're so hung up on our view of fairness, our view that we worked hard to get what we deserve, that we forget what God desires for all of us—and abundant life in Christ, who gave up everything, and laid down his life for us.

### **Praying with others or alone - Call to Worship (Psalm 105:1-5a)**

O give thanks to the LORD, call on God's name, *make known God's deeds among the peoples.*

Sing to God, sing praises to God; *tell of all God's wonderful works.*

Glory in God's holy name; *let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.*

Seek the LORD and God's strength; *seek God's presence continually.*

Remember the wonderful works God has done.

### **Prayer of Brokenness/Confession**

God of Justice and Mercy,

we confess that often our desire for justice is a desire for punishment of those who have done us wrong.

We confess that we sometimes do not show mercy to those who have wronged us,

yet we expect mercy ourselves. Forgive us for our selfish, foolish ways.

Forgive us for not seeking Your way that turns the world upside down.

In Your reign, You welcome those who have come around last.

You embrace those who realize they need to turn their lives around even at the last moment.

You love us all as Your children. Help us to love with that same love.

Help us to show mercy as You have showed mercy to us.

Help us to practice justice that repairs and restores, rather than punishes.

In the name of Christ, who has shown us the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we pray. Amen.

### **Prayer**

God of our Ancestors, You continue to show us the way out of oppression. You continue to lead us through the wilderness with a promise of an abundant life. Sometimes, we have become our own stumbling blocks, longing for a vision of the past that never existed, instead of understanding You are with us, right now.

Sometimes, we hope for a future that is not what You desire for us and are disappointed when the paths don't lead us where we hope. God of our Ancestors, help us to trust in You. Remind us of the promises of old, and guide us to move forward in faith, even when the path is unknown. Help us to let go of false hopes, of veiled memories of better days, and lead us into Your ways of love, justice, and mercy.

For we know that Your reign is at hand, and is coming. We know Your beloved community is now, and yet to be complete. We put our trust in You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Blessing/Assurance**

How great and merciful is our God! How just and true!

How wonderful that our God loves us and forgives us.

How awesome that God accepts us, and calls us to love one another as we have first been loved by God.

Seek forgiveness from others by doing the hard work toward reparation and reconciliation, and know that God forgives you, and God's love and grace are with you always. Amen.