



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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My People
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Jonah 3:10-4:11
Philippians 1:21-30

It's hard to imagine, but I've been working here at Westminster for over ten years now. And before that, I had another 5 or so years of youth ministry experience under my belt. That's about 15 years of youth ministry! That's a lot of dodgeball!

One little saying has come up to help me get through the chaos that is often a part of youth ministry, and it is "These are my people."

When a parent comes up to me and says "I just don't understand my son or daughter, they're so weird at this age!" I say "These are my people."

When a group of students and I stay up all night around a campfire debating who would win in a fight, a polar bear or a silverback gorilla (it's the polar bear, just so we're all clear), I say "These are my people."

Even just yesterday, as I sat across from a ninth grade girl who single handedly consumed 20 hot wings on a dare, I said "These are my people."

The saying is a bit of a joke, except when it's not. A few days ago one of our students left a binder at the church, without which she would have lost points on a project she was working on. So I drove it over to the school, because these are my people. When an eagle scout comes through the church and needs help with a project, I'm always willing to do whatever we need to do to help them get through it, because these are my people. And of course when we find

out that a young girl was in a car accident, sustained a major brain trauma, and needs our love, support, prayers, and presence, they're all there. Because she too is our people.

One of the best parts of being a pastor is that this category of who my people are has been expanding beyond the limits of just teenagers. When I have had the honor of sitting in the hospital with a few of you while you recover, to pray with you, to laugh with you, to enjoy hearing what God is doing in your life, you too become my people. As I've celebrated the sacraments here, particularly baptisms, holding little babies in my arms and walking them up and down the aisles, I've thought "these are my people too." And as I continue to work with couples who are getting ready for marriage, just figuring out what it means to start out this new life together, I realize that they too are my people.

Today, I want to ask a question for us. Who are your people?

We begin in the book of Jonah. This is a rather weird little book, and it's weird even without the fish story. We're not even going to get in to that today. But there's plenty of other weirdness in this story to keep us going. Jonah is a prophet of God, yet when the book opens he is on the run from what God has called him to. Later, when a storm at sea is having its way with a ship, the pagan sailors are praying to a God they don't believe in, and God's prophet is sleeping. In the passage we read this morning, Jonah loses his shade bush, and decides that this alone is enough to wish to die. Nobody in this story is behaving the way we would expect them to.

And that includes God. God has sent Jonah to Nineveh to proclaim judgement, but God relents when he sees their desire to repent, to turn back toward God. The people of

Nineveh are the enemies to the people of Israel. They are the violent, the idolaters, the conquerors. And particularly at a time when people viewed religion very tribally, where my nation's God would go up against yours in battle, the idea that the God of Israel would actually forgive and save the enemy would have been offensive!

So Jonah kind of has a hissy fit. Look at what he says in chapter 4, verse 2: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Something that I usually whisper as a quiet thanks to God has become something of an insult in Jonah's mouth. He's angry at God for being forgiving! How did a person like Jonah get to this point? Let's take a second to compare him to someone else from the biblical narrative.

Paul and Jonah actually have quite a few things in common. They are both carriers of God's message to the people of God. They weren't afraid of preaching difficult to hear messages on God's behalf. But most of all they both know what it's like to see God do things differently than they would have imagined.

Paul is in prison for preaching the Gospel of Jesus. At this point in the story, his execution is very likely near at hand, and he's predictably struggling with a bit of depression. He's not sure if he wants to keep going, to keep fighting for the people of God, or if he'd rather just give up and be with Christ. Yet as he keeps writing, as he keeps thinking about it, he decides to keep going. So we wind up with this rather odd situation this morning. One person is standing at what should be the happy ending, where God got what God wanted in the end, and people turned back toward him, and this person wants to end his life. On the other hand, the guy

who's on death row is excitedly looking forward to what God has in store in the future. What's going on here?

Paul gets a couple of things right in this story. For starters, Paul loves to boast. He brags so much about so many things that we might get the impression that he'd be no fun to actually be around as a person. But in this letter to the Philippians, Paul is careful to point out that he's giving God the credit. He's boasting in the good work of Jesus Christ. He wants to be a kind of a cheerleader for what God is doing.

To do this, Paul has to do a couple of things. He knows that he has to empty himself out. You can't be God's cheerleader if you are too full of yourself. You have to pay attention to what God is doing in the world, see all of the places where Jesus Christ is active. And then when the situation is right, you have to speak up for God. This is the lane that Paul wants to be in. He wants to boast for God.

Jonah wants to boast too, but he wants to boast in Jonah. For a prophet to make a prediction that didn't come true, that prophet could be taken out and stoned to death. Jonah recognizes that what has just happened in Nineveh is bad for business, so he's a bit sore about it. He won't be able to brag in his own good work.

The second thing that Paul gets right is an understanding that working for God isn't always easy. In fact, Paul tells the Philippians that they get the *privilege* of suffering on behalf of God. Imagine how counter this is to even our own culture. Take a look at the opening scene of just about any infomercial and you'll see what I'm talking about. "Tired of a pickle jar that just won't open? For only nine easy payments of \$12.99 you too could rid yourself of the suffering..."

What if this suffering we are finding ourselves in was meant to be experienced? What if God is putting us through something to actually make us stronger? What if suffering is for our own benefit? But a word of caution here, make sure that you are actually suffering for God, and not bringing it about on yourself. I am a master at causing my own suffering, let me tell you. And so is Jonah. He's suffering because he can't see God taking a victory lap right in front of him. Just about the entire sum of Jonah's suffering could be eliminated by Jonah himself. Suffering for God is a privilege. Suffering because of your own pride is just silly.

But then, I think the biggest thing that Jonah gets right here is that he has an expanding sense of who his people are. As you keep reading through Philippians, you see that Paul is drawing energy from the people of Philippi. This is a church that Paul himself has planted. He's been with them through a lion's share of their celebrations together. He's stood with them through the dark days of struggles. He's joined with them together in worship, celebrating everything that God is doing in their midst. And he's been with them as they mourned, wondering why it was that God felt so distant. He's walked life with this church. These, these are his people.

Jonah wants absolutely no part in claiming the people of Nineveh as his own people. In the back of his own mind, Jonah knows that if God forgives the people of this city, Jonah is going to have to forgive them too, and that's something he wants absolutely nothing to do with. For Jonah, he would rather die than be a part of *them*.

God's love and forgiveness push us to expand our definition of who our people are. Our own pride and contempt pushes us to contract.

The book of Jonah is an odd little prophetic book, as it ends with a question. So perhaps, this sermon today should end with a series of questions for us to consider as a church:

Who are your people? Who are the people you cheer on towards success? The people whose failure you mourn? The people you join together in prayer during their struggles, and they yours?

Who are the people that cause you to rejoice in what God is doing in their lives? You rejoice when God forgives them, or heals them, or even blesses them a little bit more than you? Who are the people you would put flesh and blood on love for, because they are your people? Who would you rush to the hospital to spend time with? Who would you raise money for? Who would you help move, even without the promise of pizza?

Who are the people you encourage to be better? Who are the ones you invite to be the best versions of themselves? The ones you push a little bit harder than everyone else, because you love them enough to want what's best for them?

Or perhaps we could ask these questions a bit more dangerously...

Who aren't your people? Who are the people you have a hard time imagining God forgiving? Who are the people you kind of secretly wish you could see get punished by God the way Jonah did on top of that hill? Who are the people you have the luxury to ignore? Who are the people you run away from spreading the good news of God's gospel forgiveness to? Who takes your energy away from you, rather than inspiring you to soldier on?

When Jesus wanted to talk about this, he told a story. He shared the story of a rich man who wanted to host a wedding banquet, and had his servants invite all the usual suspects. Odd thing was, not a single one of the people you would expect to be there showed up. So the master sent word out to EVERYONE to invite them to the party. Go get the ones on the streets, the drunks, the druggies, the prostitutes. Get the ones left behind by society, the ones everyone has given up on to the point that they give up on themselves. Get those people and bring them into the party, because those are my people too.

Who are your people? What does it look like for you to claim a few more people this week? What does it look like for you to join in the ever expanding kingdom of God by claiming a few more of God's people as your own. If God can offer forgiveness and love to all kinds of people, what's getting in our way?



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