

Justice and God's New Creation Story

Readings

Jonah 3:10—4:11

Ps 145:14-21

Phil 1:21-27

Matt 20:1-16

Opening

My grandfather and namesake, Jack King Sr., was a good man. He survived the Great Depression. He became a pastor. He was extremely frugal. And he was arguably the most loyal alumnus ever to graduate Dobyns-Bennett High School in Kingsport, TN. When D-B played my high school, the Central Bobcats, in the football playoffs, he had one comment for his grandchildren: Go D-B.

I may have told you another story about my grandfather, but as a friend of mine says, don't stop me because I love telling it. It was an especially good mail day at my grandparents' house when the monthly installment of D-B's alumni newsletter with great interest. They kept updated each month with their classmates, including those who had passed away. One day as my grandmother was reading the newsletter, she announced, "Well Buster Grigsby died." To which my grandfather replied, "Well then Buster Grigsby died owing me 50 cents."

I failed to mention that Jack King Sr was trained as an accountant before he became a pastor. The accountant within him never left even when he stopped bookkeeping.

(Disclaimer: I never lived through a Great Depression.) Still, his frugality became a triviality. Good people can fixate on trivial matters. Like laborers in a vineyard. Like Jonah.

Measure for Measure

We know Jonah is a reluctant prophet; even more, he's a fugitive prophet. His turning point, his repentance, happens in the stomach of the great fish.

I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God...Salvation belongs to the Lord!¹

Jonah is all "praise the Lord" when he hits bottom. When he emerges from the depths, he's ready to preach the Word of the Lord in the depths of enemy territory—Assyria; capital, Ninevah. The Lord has a word for Ninevah and he sends Jonah: "call out *against* it."²

That Jonah can do. He's ready to preach judgment over Ninevah. He's got a simple sermon he proclaims, "Yet forty days, and Ninevah will be overthrown!" Jonah likes preaching judgment. He wants God to bring the heat. It's time the tables were turned on Assyria. The capital city is going down in forty days. Jonah is the timekeeper for judgement day in Ninevah.

Then the impossible happens—the King of Ninevah repents. Out comes the sackcloth. He sits in ashes rather than remain on his Assyrian throne. He orders water and food supplies to be put away. Radical repentance here. And God holds back his judgment over Ninevah. And Jonah seethes with anger.

¹Jonah 2.6,9

²Jonah 3.2

This kind of mercy doesn't square with Jonah's sense of justice. The Lord had a good plan until he holds back. Overthrow Ninevah and Israel will be saved from her enemies. Give Ninevah her just deserts and God's world will be back on balance again. segment

When Jonah repents, he blesses God for mercy. When pagans repent, Jonah asks to die. Ninevah's repentance and her pardon becomes Jonah's death wish. It's another instance of the simple truth Ted VanderEnde expressed last week: God forgives, man retaliates.

Jonah is God's messenger, but he has not learned the mystery of God's justice. Jonah doesn't learn very well from spoken words. He has to learn through intense experience. First, it was the belly of the great fish, now he's exposed in the desert. His body has no cover from soaring temperatures; in the end, his soul will be uncovered above all.

The Lord sends a shade tree to grow within a day, then sends a worm to kill the plant the next day. Jonah has no protection from scorching desert winds and he resents God for killing the plant. He has an angry grief for the life of this plant, in whom there is no breath, nor image of God. *Jonah loves the image of this plant more than the images of God living (and repenting) in Ninevah.* Therein lies Jonah's soul exposure. What do you desire, Jonah? Are you my messenger or an accountant of the world's justice—justice without mercy?

Laboring Early and Late

The day laborers working in more pleasant environs, their master's vineyard, are keeping count of fairness, too. On the surface of this brief little story we hear our Lord Jesus teaching his disciples (and us) how much differently justice and fairness works in his kingdom. There's more to this little story beyond surface appearances, too. More on that later. For now, let's stay with this obvious lesson and look more closely at this parable.

The landowner hires five groups of laborers for his vineyard. He hires group 1 at dawn. New groups join the effort at regular intervals of about 3 hours: the third hour, six hour, ninth hour, and finally the eleventh hour. The landowner has the same pay scale regardless of hours worked: one denarius, the equivalent of a day's wage.

When payroll posts to each laborer's account, we find that all laborers, save the eleventh hour group, are also accountants—accountants of what is fair and just. Like Jonah, their time in the scorching heat exposes their souls. They grumble at the master's generosity toward the one hour laborers. And their disgruntled reply resounds the voice of human justice, not godly justice: "we deserve our fair share. Last in; first out. Measure for measure; that's what's right. We're more just than you are."

Not in this landowner's vineyard. In this vineyard, the last will be first. The great fear among the laborers is this: equal reward for a co-worker who just started breaking a sweat when the day ended. But it's the great joy and generosity of the master to reward the least and last of his company.

In contrast, the master offers no timid correction to the disgruntled majority. He sharply answers their complaint: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" I prefer another translation of that second question, which reads very differently: "*Is your eye evil because I am generous?*"

Both of those questions expose the soul. They cut to the heart. Do I presume a higher wisdom than God for *his kingdom*? The second question is more searing: 'is your eye evil at God's generosity?'

The image of the eye is everything in this question. It's everything throughout the Gospels. Your eye is the organ by which you see *everything* in the world. If your eye is evil—filled with envy, selfishness, resentment—you will oppose the mercy of God. Just like Jonah; just like these laborers. It's his vineyard and we're called to learn his justice. We're called to learn his "last will be first" economy.

Creation, Redemption, New Creation

With today's themes I need to say a bit more about **justice**, the Kingdom of God, and our times. This topic requires much greater length than a single sermon, so I'll say more on this subject in coming days, specifically in a few blog posts I'm composing for our website.

My greatest concern regarding matters of justice in our time is faithfulness to the *whole* Gospel of Jesus Christ and the *whole* Word of God. Faithfulness to the whole Gospel and the whole Word of God requires a demanding and constant effort, effort that most people don't put forth because it's rigorous. Everyone wants a Jesus endorsement for their cause or their candidate, but rare are the voices in our time seeking and wrestling with *the whole counsel of God*.

When you seek the whole Word of God, you find three major chapters in God's story—Creation, Redemption, and New Creation.

Please listen carefully here because these categories are essential. I post my sermon on our website, but take notes if it helps in this section:

- The **Creation chapter** teaches me that God made his world good and beautiful. He crowned male and female with his ultimate goodness, giving them his own image. He made them to live in harmony with one another and with their Creator.
- The **Redemption chapter** teach me that God will stop at nothing to repair his good but damaged world. In Israel's story and ultimately in Jesus Christ, we see how God deals seriously with sin, idolatry, and death to remove its curse. God is determined to heal and repair all that is damaged in his good creation and especially among his image bearers.
- The **New Creation chapter** teaches me that God will complete his redemption work. Jesus Christ will come again to his world as Judge of the living and the dead. When he comes again, his judgment will remove sin, idols and death and his world will be made new for eternity.

That is the story of the whole Gospel and the whole Word of God, sketched in the broadest brush strokes. Unless you have *this* story, *this* Gospel, *this* Word of God in your mind and heart, you will not have a thoroughly biblical view of justice. If another *ideology*—whether from the right, the middle, or the left, has greater influence on my thoughts, my words, and actions, then I'm living in a different story.

No matter the issues we face in our time, I've resolved to think through these basic categories of God's story: **creation, redemption, new creation**. When I'm confused, torn, or unsure about an issue, I delve deeper, I drill down further into these themes in Scripture. I

read Scriptures among believers in the communion of saints. Jesus tells us the eye is everything, so I want my eyes to see every contested or divisive issue of our time through creation, redemption, and new creation.

The foremost justice issue in recent days and months is racial violence, so let's go there. When I preached on shining Jesus' light in divisive times in January, I said we would not ignore or walk on eggshells as a community regarding social issues, but we would seek the truth of God in a spirit of love for one another. Please hear that this is my heart as I address this topic.

When I read creation, redemption, and new creation alongside matters of racial strife and violence, I must recall five biblical truths, at the very least:

- That all human beings are created in the image of God
- That God called Abraham to be the father of many nations; to bless the nations of the earth.
- That Jesus Christ redeems the sin of the world, not by inflicting violence, but by dying on the cross.
- That the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost so that men, women, and children of every nation could be filled with the Spirit of God.
- That God's new creation will be filled with every tribe, tongue, and nation and the nations will be healed from violence.

I bring this story to mind when we see the innocent lives of people of color taken by violence. I bring this story to mind when we see violent acts promoted and committed by left-wing *and* right-wing groups. Christians cannot condone any form of mob violence, not if you read the book of Acts as the Word of God. The apostles *suffered* mob violence by preaching the Gospel. /

There's tremendous pressure to announce what camp you're in on any or all divisive issues. The pull from both extremes is strong. Apparently the middle is no longer an acceptable option in our time. A mob mentality of competing ideologies has broken loose.

Well I do not accept the premise. Ideology cannot compete with Gospel theology; never has, never will. The only time God chose one nation among the rest was when he called Abraham. And he called Abraham to begin his redemption work *for the sake of all nations, so that all nations would be blessed*. Jesus Christ completed that redemption work on the Cross and the Gospel came to the nations when the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost. That's the story we're living in. It takes more effort to consult Scripture with social issues, but let us never be lazy or disobedient regarding the Word of God.

Living in this story means my lone allegiance is the kingdom of God, not any party or cause. But living in this story doesn't mean keeping a safe distance from the conflicts of our time.

Many of you know that I enjoy running. When I learned of the Ahmaud Arbery killing, the young African-American man murdered during an ordinary run, I knew I couldn't look away. As much as I wanted to look away when video was released of the last moments of his life, I knew I had to watch to know this footage—to turn my eyes *toward* the experience of people of color. Living in this story, with eyes open to stories of injustice such as this, I aim to live my life in Knoxville, TN, differently, seeking how I can participate in God's redemption and new creation story.

For Jesus Christ came

to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captive, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ³

That's the Gospel from Jesus' own mouth in Luke 4. So much better than ideology.

Jonah was clinging to his personal ideology and he lost the plot. He valued a plant more than the life of his enemies, the Ninevites. Jonah would have fit well with the spirit of our age. He wants judgment and no mercy. He was God's messenger without having God's heart. "Do you do well to be angry Jonah?" Oh to have a heart for my enemies; to desire their repentance, not to my cause, but to the Kingdom of God.

³Luke 4.18-19

I'm a laborer in his vineyard. It's his Kingdom, not mine. I'm not meant to impose my worldly views of justice upon him. I'm called to learn and repent, learn and repent. To seek the Kingdom of God and all its righteousness, strange though it be.

Conclusion

There's one final feature that makes everything fit together. This parable was not only a parable about justice and fairness, it is most definitely a parable about God's Kingdom and more specifically **his new creation**. We read this story mid-conversation with his disciples. The Lord Jesus *began* this conversation saying, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne..."⁴

My brothers and sisters, we are living between the times—between God's redemption in Jesus Christ and his new creation at the end of time. We were converted to a Gospel and a Kingdom where the last will be first. We were converted to the Redeemer God whose mercy is more severe than his judgment. We may not fit well with our times. No matter, because the only story that really matters is the one that moves from creation to redemption to new creation for the glory of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴Matthew 19.28