

First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 20:29-24, “Christ the Lord: Compassionate”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/21/2024

Eventually, everything changes.

It was a warm and drippy winter until an arctic front dropped in last week
and changed everything.

Most of the country, regardless of their politics, is bemoaning
the apparent Biden – Trump rematch for President of the United States.

But *eventually* even our presidential candidates will change.

In a more lasting way, the place we live changes:

McMinnville was once a tiny agricultural and college town;
now it is internationally known as wine country
with concerns over growing too fast.

We’ve got a new development being considered west of Hill Road,
we’ve got increasing traffic congestion at peak hours,
and we nearly had a five-story hotel take over downtown.

Our culture changes—think about what “the American dream” meant
to the average citizen in the 1950s vs. the 1990s vs. today.

We are in a much more diverse, nuanced,
and difficult to pin-down era today than we were 70 years ago.

Even our faith changes as we move from one era of life to another,
and as we encounter new societal questions
and learn more about ourselves and the universe.

Eventually, everything changes. But does God change?

Is the God we worship today the same as the one we read about in Genesis?

The God of Israel? The God revealed as Yahweh in the Exodus?

You know the Sunday school answer, “Yes, God is always the same.”

But when you read the book of Exodus,

do you feel that you worship the same God today
that Moses worshiped in the book of Exodus?

Or ... *or* ... do you sense that God, too, has changed?

Many people I encounter have a default concept that there's
a God of the Old Testament who is focused on the law and judgement
while in the New Testament we discover
a God of love and forgiveness.

Are there two different Gods in the Bible?

Imagine a person who intellectually believes that God
is the same yesterday, today, and forever,
but *emotionally* relates to the default view I just described,
that the God they read about in some part of the Bible
isn't the same God they see in Jesus
and also isn't the same God they experience
in their daily spiritual journey.

In that scenario, what's going to win – a person's intellect
or their emotions and experience? Emotions and experience every time!
And that can lead to a sense of disconnect
between our reading of scripture and our lived experience
that is devastating for spiritual growth.

Do we encounter a different flavor of God in the Old Testament
than we see in the person of Jesus?

For the next four weeks, I plan to explore how Jesus
resolves this question both intellectually *and* emotionally.

My basic response is that there is no distinction in character between Jesus,
the Holy Spirit, and the God of Israel.

In the first writings of God's people, we encounter Yahweh,
"I am who I am," the God of all Creation (grand, powerful).

In the New Testament we discover Christ the Lord (humble, personal).

And yet...(and this is a great mystery of our faith)
there is a profound *oneness* within these figures:

Jesus was the physical embodiment of Yahweh's character
as revealed to Israel in the Old Testament.

This was *so true* that the earliest followers of Jesus
had to sort out why it would possibly be okay
to worship Jesus since they knew there was only
one true God.

If your memory is in tip-top shape you might recall that back in November we concluded our 12 week study of Exodus with Exodus 34:6-7.

“The Lord, the Lord, [Yahweh, Yahweh] the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

For the imagination of Israel’s prophets, priests, and poets, this description of Yahweh became a go-to reference point.

We used one hyperlinked use of these phrases
in our call to worship from Ps. 145 and used another one
in our assurance of pardon from Ps. 103.

And next week we will sing a modern application of these passages with the praise team.

These are the attributes of God most central to Israel’s story telling and theology:
Yahweh is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger,
abounding in steadfast loyal-love, and faithfulness.

You know who I am reminded of who shares those same characteristics?
Jesus.

Jesus is the personal embodiment of the character of Yahweh as revealed in Exodus 34:6.

Not just as an intellectual exercise, but in terms of
how Israel encountered Yahweh in vital relationship,
how the writers of the New Testament encountered Jesus,
and how we encounter the Triune God of grace
in our contemporary spirituality.

Having said all that, there are also good reasons why we *feel and think* differently about how God is depicted in some parts of scripture than others.

I’ll try to touch on those as we go along through this series.

This series is entitled, “Christ the Lord,” which connects the identify of Jesus as the *Christ* or the Messiah of Israel and the identity of Yahweh whose name is too holy to be spoken aloud by Jews and so they replace Yahweh with “*The Lord.*”

Christ ... the Lord: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loyal-love, and faithful.

And we must not forget:

Christ filled with and empowered by the Spirit of the Lord.

Today’s passage from Matthew 20 reveals the way Jesus embodies the compassion of Yahweh.

[Deep breath, shake out the wiggles, here comes part 2]

At this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has predicted his death three times, he’s completed four of his five major teaching section in the gospel, and he is on his way to Jerusalem.

In fact, the passage says he is leaving Jericho, which is about 20 miles NE of Jerusalem.

In the *next* passage Jesus enters Jerusalem in a scene we often refer to as the triumphal entry, so this is a point of escalating energy, publicity, and attention for Jesus.

We’re a long way from the early moments in which Jesus tells people to be quiet about who he is and what miracles he has done.

This context helps us understand why Jesus leaves Jericho toward Jerusalem with a large crowd following him.

Along the way there were two blind men sitting by the roadside.

They’re blind, okay, but they’re not deaf –

they pick up on the large group making their way and hear enough of what is being said

that they understand Jesus is among this growing crowd.

These two men were outcasts, unable to work in that society, sitting by the road as beggars.

Blindness was often understood as a curse from God to punish people.

In the gospel of John the Pharisees ask a blind man,
“Who sinned that he was born blind – him or his parents?”
So naturally these two would have been close companions,
sharing a similar fate in society.

But in Jesus they must have discerned something different.
They must have heard that he was not like other rabbis
and teachers of the law.
For when Jesus comes, they do not call him by his common name,
but with a sign that they perceive something greater than most others.
They shout together, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”
Again and again they call out,
unsure of exactly where Jesus is in the crowd.

“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”
“Lord” they say. Three times Jesus is addressed as Lord.
It was an ancient honorific title, but as I mentioned earlier,
it was also more than that.
When Jews read the name of Yahweh, they replaced it by saying, “Lord.”
Biblical scholar Dale Bruner points out that in Matthew’s gospel
only believers refer to Jesus as, “Lord.”
So at least in the background, this is a hint and Jesus’
connection to Yahweh.

The blind buddies also call out, “Son of David.”
Now this is quite unusual. Matthew uses the title for Jesus seven times in all,
but outside of this story the title, “Son of David”
does not appear in any other NT writing.

Again, Dale Bruner explains that
“Israel has believed that the promised Messiah was going to come
from the House of David, be a son of David,
and sit ‘forever’ on David’s throne as king.”

So these two blind beggars are calling out to Jesus as both Lord and Messiah.
In the Greek they are literally calling out “*kyrie elieson,*” *Lord, have mercy.*

The crowd, however, lacks the vision of these blind men.
They tell these guys to shut up and get out the way.

“Can you be quiet and *move?*
We’re trying to walk with *Jesus*, Okay?!?”

But these blind brothers shouted all the louder,
“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”

Jesus hears. Jesus hears.

As Yahweh heard the cries for mercy from the Hebrews slaves of Egypt,
so Jesus hears the cries of these blind beggars of Jericho.

He hears, stops, walks through the crowd, and addresses these men.

Surely everyone is silent as he asks them,
“What do you want me to do for you?”

“Lord,” they answered, “we want our sight.”

You understand the irony here, don’t you?

The blind men are the only ones who see Jesus for who he really is,
and what they want ... is sight!

And friends, in this moment, Jesus has *compassion* on these two men.

He sees their heart, he knows their lives
have been full of discrimination and hardship.

But he also sees that they see him with a depth of understanding
that few others have attained.

So he has compassion on them.

The word for compassion here is a wonderful, crazy sounding Greek word,
splanchnistheis which means, “he felt for them deep down inside.”

Jesus is *emotionally* connected with them just as Yahweh

was emotionally invested in the suffering of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

Jesus walks over to them and in full view of the crowd
who had rebuked them, he touches their eyes.

Could Jesus have simply snapped his fingers and restored their sight? Of course.

But Jesus had *compassion* on them. This was *personal*.

And so his response to their call for healing from the Messiah
of Israel was also personal.

He walked over and touched them.

As those who follow Jesus, we are not merely called to fix problems.

We are given the gift of life with Jesus

so that we can share in the compassion of Jesus
and be personally connected to all those
whom Jesus brings our way.

If our ministry of healing or helping becomes a to-do list,
if people become a number or a problem or a burden,
then we don't have room for *splanchnistheis*.

After Jesus touches their eyes, they receive their sight immediately.

And what do they do? They follow him.

The compassion of Yahweh compelled Israel to trust Yahweh (sometimes!)
through the wilderness journey to the promised land.

The compassionate healing of Jesus compelled these men
to immediately stand up and walk, following the one
who they knew as the Son of David,
Christ the Lord, full of compassion.

I have no doubt that as they followed him their eyes were full of tears
and they called out with rejoicing.

We worship a God of compassion.

We worship a God who is emotionally connected to our experience,
who is not far off.

This is the God of the Old Testament and this is the God we encounter in Jesus,
and (something we must not forget during this series)

this is the same God who fills us today, *in this very moment*
through the presence of the Holy Spirit.