

Prayer: *God, our rock and deliverer, help us to stand on the sure footage of your love. May the power of your love be, for us, a fortress against the tensions in our lives driving us away from you. May we have courage to confront all that wants to claim our love and attention so distracting us from hearing your call to follow you - now. Amen.*

Today we were given the title 'Embracing the Tension' for our theme, reflections, guide.... And let me tell you – it has done its best to make me tense! The Psalm was the given as a first choice for our title – but as I read the Psalm it did not inspire me to **embrace tension** rather... cV->

Rather the Psalms are one of my 'go-to' places when tension is in my life. What is it for you? I go to the psalms when tension is embracing me! Listen to our opening verses “**5 Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. 6 He alone is my rock** and my salvation; he is my fortress, **I will not be shaken.**” – This is a place go when tension is embracing, not to go to, to embrace tension!!

So I turned to one of the other bible readings given to us for today, Jonah. And I want to ask – how many of us heard tension in these words of scripture? I wondered about how much of the tension in this book is because I know the whole story and can put our verses into a big picture. Remember Jonah? Reluctant prophet – so against doing what God asked him to do **he ran away!** This is so classic, how many of us here have run away? Jonah did, he hid, well tried to, it doesn't really work running away from God when God has called you to do something! Now there's a source of tension! Today, God is calling a **2nd** time...

So if anyone is embracing tension **its Jonah** at this point in his life, he had to work out what he was going to do. He discovered running away from God didn't work – so he embraced his tension and obeyed! Great way to solve tension – agree, do it, get it done! Jonah went to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh – and it was huge, to do what he didn't want to do. Nineveh was the capital the capital of the Assyrian empire which had many times conquered and oppressed the people of Israel and Judah in the 9th – 8th centuries BCE. Assyria is the ancient name for modern Iraq, - *interesting that modern Iraq is creating so much tension on the world stage at the moment!* I suspect it has always given God's people at least, tension! Cv

Jonah starts to walk across the city – can I pass on a little tension? We have still to uncover an ancient city as large as the one Jonah describes. ^{*1} **But to Jonah** being the reluctant presence of God it was huge, rather like our tasks become when we don't want to do them, or are not sure of our decision or... We have this way of making things bigger than they really are because of the emotional or intellectual or 'other' quotient rather than the cold facts. Maybe there is some wisdom in our title after all – when we embrace our tension rather than running away and deal with it, it stops increasing in size and just might become manageable... Embrace not evade!

It certainly was the case for Jonah, as he walked, calling out God's message and **when Jonah does it** – God is released, the Spirit released, (Jonah means Dove by the way, and of course we all remember that one of the strongest symbols we have for the Spirit of God is the 'Dove'); here we have the Word of God spoken and as promised it **does not return empty**. The Word of God does what it is supposed to do, everyone hears it and they all turn to God. From the King to the lowest worker, the people turned from their evil ways and so God loved them into life – God did not destroy, God loved them *toooo*. And this point Jonah's story at least two levels of tension 1. God saved them the Nineveites, non Hebrew /Israelites **and** 2. That God saved them made Jonah mad – really angry – he sulked –read the book to find out more!

Because **that part** is not in our story today –but it influences our understanding of just how the book of Jonah is full of tension on all sorts of levels. ^{*2} This is a book written at or after the exile, as a reaction to the internal ethnic cleansing which marked this period of Israel's history. At that time it was believed Israel's fall from God's grace was a result of their falling way from God and God's ways and their inter-cultural marriages. So God had been offended. The only way the authorities decided, to restore the relationship as God's people was to cleanse, **to the tenth generation the blood lines**. Tension? Ouch! Cv

In other words God's love and compassion were to be peculiar to Israel. Jonah's story is the **antidote** to such arrogance. Gentile Nineveh, chosen for its 'sinfulness' in folklore becomes the object of God's mercy and compassion and Jonah the instrument of the boundlessness of God's love. I quote: ^{*4}“The book of Jonah remains in the bible to counter human attempts to say that the love of God is bounded by the limits of any human beings love or by any religions inability to be inclusive”. Cv

There are no boundaries on the love of God. Nor is there only one language in which God's word is to be spoken and understood, there is only one way of responding – to accept and obey – no matter who you are, how you speak, what you do.... God is waiting for you with good news: you are wanted, loved, and you belong. This is the Good news of Jesus – this is why we are here this morning and this is why we follow Jesus. We **belong**: therefore we share this good News, inviting all others to join us.

Right? It's not hard is it? It's not a source of tension to embrace is it? Tension belongs in our lives: no tension= no life, so actually learning how to embrace it is the way to stay sensible, sane and following Jesus way. It may not include staying alive, there are enough martyrs to prove this truth! Even our opening verses from Mark's Gospel this morning say: 'After John was put in prison...' While John wasn't a follower of Jesus, his message about God had him in prison, a tense start to Jesus ministry launch!

But if we dig deeper into the effect of Jesus call to the disciples it opens our eyes to the fact it wasn't any easier for them than it is for us. I suspect we sometimes dismiss the disciples as being 'just' fishermen – easy to 'drop their nets and wander the roads behind a rabbi.... BUT – but *there are* so many points of tension in even these few verses I don't know which ones are important for today – trusting God, I have to make a decision! I'm going to say that one of those significant points is that Mark has Jesus calling the launch of his ministry a 'NOW' moment in God language.

NIV has 'The time has come' – the Greek word is *Kairos* – this is not one of our clock-measured moments, it is God-time moment- the Message translates Jesus words: as "Time's up!" So Jesus was saying: ***Now – turn to God now*** – Do you think there is an echo of Jonah's call to the people of Nineveh? '40 more days and...' – Time's up, God's here and what are **you** doing about it? What did Jesus do? ->

He went and called people to him- using words that have for years been a source of tension because they have been separated from the context and turned into an excuse to measure Christian success: lots of "fish" – ***or not***; lots of people in church seats – ***or not***... but I made a discovery this week: this translation of verse 17; ^{*3} “And Jesus said to them, "Come after me and I will make you **to be** fishers of people." In a fresh act of creation, Jesus will make his followers into "new people" following a new "way" in a New Community. Put another way, "fishers of people" has nothing to do with the popular notion of evangelism. The idea is assuredly not to go around trying to "hook" people into Christianity so they can be "saved" according to our definitions. Rather, Jesus is calling these fishermen onto a new path--a new way of living.

The reference to "fishers" recalls Jeremiah 16: 16: "I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them..." The context of Jeremiah is to "catch" those who have been cast out--those cast out by Yahweh! In Mark's theology, this is exactly what Jesus will do. He will redeem everything, including those who would have been rejected by God's law. Hear the echo of Jonah's story?

Jesus' Good News announced Mark says right at the beginning of his ministry is to catch those who have been dropped out of the system because God loves them, wants them and will invite them to belong **and asks all those who follow him** to be part of his community to invite all people to hear this good news. How hard is that? Can we be the Jesus community who welcomes those who feel rejected, left on the outside, abandoned, even when they feel it's been by the church! Does that create tension? It should – but we have to look at it, work with it, decide if we are Jesus people or not. **Will we follow?** As Jesus people / community our identity is in him, found in living his ways, in his Kingdom **therefore accepting** – even *embracing* the tension this creates. Amen.