

GAME CHANGER

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 & Mark1:14-20
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Academics call them “paradigm shifts.”

Author Malcolm Gladwell calls them “tipping points.”

In the modern vernacular they are “game changers.”

These are the people who change everything. They are the events after which nothing remains the same. They are the things which make everything that came before seem obsolete.

We have all experienced game changers and how they change the world around us or our perception of that world. They happen in sports, in industry, in medicine and, yes, in religion.

Jonah was a game changer and, apparently, so was the one-sentence he preached to the people of Nineveh. And, in the gospel of Mark, Jesus preaches a one-sentence message that turns out to be a game changer for four fishermen...and for us.

GAME CHANGERS

Probably no one and nothing has served as a more profound game changer in most of our lives than Steve Jobs and the technological changes that he either invented or forced others to invent who wished to keep up with him.

I imagine that there are people here, this morning, who can remember listening to a gramophone and received an MP3 player from their grandchildren for Christmas. They remember listening to the Green Hornet on radio and can now watch him on Hulu or Netflix.

They remember telephone party lines and now carry an I-Phone in their pocket. Their first job required them to use a manual typewriter, probably an Underwood, and, today, they do their typing on a computer. The first photograph they took was with a Brownie box camera and now they take snapshots with their telephones.

Some time ago, I heard a technology expert say it was Steve Jobs who taught us how to use a mouse. And his last act before he died, was to make the mouse obsolete. Within five years, touch-screen technology will be the industry standard for all computers.

He introduced Siri voice-recognition software to the I-Phone but it isn't really voice-recognition, it's language recognition. The true game changer will be when your phone can recognize your voice and will respond only to your voice. They say about three to five years from now.

Last year Amazon.com, the largest bookseller in the world, sold more digital, electronic books than they did books of the paper and ink kind, thanks to the Kindle, the Nook and the I-Pad.

All of these innovations are game changers that forced technology to make a right angle turn which took us – sometimes kicking and screaming – into the digital age. After them, nothing will ever be the same. We won't be going back to their predecessors – Princess phones, Kodachrome film, Underwood typewriters, transistor radios, record players – in our lifetimes.

The Golden Globe awards have started the annual run to the Oscars, and as the award season gears up, we might want to think a moment about the movies that were game changers for movie making and watching.

Birth of a Nation, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Star Wars, Citizen Kane, The Matrix, Avatar, Toy Story. Each of these films introduced something new in the field of technology or visual storytelling, that has changed or will change the way movies are seen forever after them.

As the Super Bowl LVIII (58) approaches, we might remember the things that changed the game of football forever.

The instant replay, instituted in 1999 has virtually removed the home field advantage. Can you imagine the game without the forward pass? There wasn't such a thing before 1933. Before Tex Schramm introduced overtime in the regular season the tie was a common game conclusion. He was the guy who put a microphone on the referee so we didn't have to memorize hand signals to know what was going on, on the field. The "NFL Sunday Ticket" offered by some cable companies has now made it possible to watch every game – EVERY GAME – on any given Sunday. And then, of course, there's the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders. Love 'em or hate 'em, they changed the game and how we view it forever.

Do you prefer basketball to football? Then you have to consider the three-point shot and the shot clock and how they changed the game. Most golfers can remember a time before the metal wood and the titanium shaft and the solid core golf ball, all of which were game changers that made the PGA lengthen their courses.

How has cable changed your television viewing and the television industry in general?

Paradigm shifts, tipping points, game changers – whatever we call them, they are a reality that affects our lives more and more every year because they are coming on faster and faster. And they are happening in religion as well.

A GAME CHANGER IN NINEVEH

The story goes that Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was such a big city that it took three days to walk its diameter: about sixty miles across.

That's big. Bigger than modern day Mexico City, New York City, Beijing, London and Moscow.

Jonah walked a third of the way into the city and preached the shortest sermon in history: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Only eight words but each one was a

game changer because, in the next verse we are told that, "...the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth."

They told us in seminary that every good sermon should have an **indicative**, which tells the way it is, and an **imperative** that tells us what to do about the way it is. X therefore Y. See?

Occasionally, a sermon can have only an indicative with an implied imperative. Sort of an "X therefore..." You can leave it up to the congregation who is listening to the sermon to figure out what comes after the therefore. But, we were told, you may never preach a sermon that is all imperative without no indicative. You can't just stand out there in the pulpit and tell people what to do. You don't, as a minister of the gospel, have the authority to do that. You must always preach from an indicative.

So here comes Jonah and he's obviously had the homiletics class that I had because he starts out with the indicative. "Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown." He doesn't expect any reaction. He thinks these people are a lost cause and he thinks that, frankly, they are getting what they deserve. So, he doesn't even bother to put an imperative, a therefore, after his indicative.

But these people hear what he has to say and they figure out the indicative. Forty days, they say. Well, maybe, we can change God's mind. Maybe, if we repent and show that we are sincere, we can change God's mind and he won't overthrow (whatever that means) our great city.

So, they all put on sackcloth and the smear ashes on their heads and they even put sack cloth and ashes on their livestock and they fast and they pray and the apologize and promise to do better and, what do you know? God sees all this and relents and changes his mind and decides to not overthrow the great city.

And you know the rest of the story. Jonah gets mad, goes up on the hillside, pouts, throws a hissy fit, and God teaches him and us an object lesson about mercy and compassion.

Jonah was a game changer for the Assyrian people whether he wanted to be or not.

He spoke and they changed. Repented. Turned around.

A GAME CHANGER IN GALILEE

In Mark's gospel, he tells us that after John the Baptizer was arrested Jesus came to Galilee and he, like Jonah, preached a very brief sermon. His, too, is a single sentence, although he uses a semi-colon:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (1:15)

I love the symmetry and balance of that message, don't you?

It begins, on the left side of the semi-colon, with two indicatives, two statements of the way it is which I think require a closer examination.

First, he tells his listeners that “the time is fulfilled.”

His listeners, you will recall, were first century Jews. They were waiting for the messiah, the one whose coming was foretold. The only problem was that there were as many specific messianic expectations as there were Jews. No one was sure what this messiah was supposed to look like and do.

Some thought he would be a hereditary monarch, descended from David, who would claim the rightful throne of Israel and take control of the government from the priest class who had usurped it during the Maccabean revolution. Others thought he would be a guerilla fighter, a zealot, who would lead Israel in throwing off the yoke of Roman oppression. Still others thought he would be a priest who would lead the people through ritual religious purity and still others thought he might be a prophet who would come like Elijah and Elisha and speak the word of the Lord. Some had given up completely on the whole idea of a single, human messiah and had embraced Isaiah’s notion of the messianic nation, a group of people who would come together to fulfill the messianic expectation.

Whatever their expectation, they had been waiting a long time under very difficult circumstances and Jesus enters the picture, there in Galilee, and says that the “the time is fulfilled.” All of the conditions required for the arrival of the messiah have been met. ***The time of waiting is over***

That’s the first indicative.

The **second** is this: “The kingdom of God has come near.” That’s the New Revised Standard Version. Personally, I prefer the more poetic language of the King James or the old Revised Standard Version, at least in this verse: “**The kingdom of God is at hand.**”

That kingdom of God that you thought was out there somewhere, is right here. That kingdom of God that you thought you could only enter after you die is available to you right now. God’s kingdom is not far away in time or space, it is near. It is so near, in fact, that you can reach out and touch it, take it, grab it, have it.

You can walk right into that kingdom right now if you choose to do so.

That’s the second indicative.

Then there’s a semi-colon and Jesus follows up with two imperatives to balance the two indicatives.

The first is a single word: *repent*.

From the Latin, meaning “turn again.” That is, go in the opposite direction. To repent means to stop doing what you are doing, turn around, and do the opposite.

If you have been waiting, stop waiting and start doing. If you have been seeking assurance, stop seeking assurance and start risking. If you have been judging others, stop judging others and start judging yourself.

Whatever you have been doing because you thought that the kingdom of God was far off, in the distance and in the future, stop doing that and start doing the opposite.

In other words, **CHANGE**. Change who you are and what you are doing.

I know, that's a tall order, but I didn't make it, Jesus did. If you have a problem with change, please take it up with him. I'm just the messenger; don't shoot me. Please.

That's the first imperative and it's a toughie. The second is even tougher.

“Believe in the good news.”

The “good news” that Jesus is talking about is, of course the two indicatives: The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.

The word “believe” is tricky, here, because belief, for us, is about intellectual assent. What we say we believe in everyday life doesn't necessarily affect how we live. We all believe in certain things that don't have any direct effect on us, right? Most of us believe in fairness and equality as principles but we aren't called to do anything about them on most days. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead but, let's face it, that doesn't have a great deal of bearing on what I eat for lunch.

But note that Jesus doesn't ask for intellectual assent. He doesn't say “believe the good news.” He adds one, little two-letter word that changes the whole thing. “Believe **IN** the good news.” The Greek word which is translated here as “believe” means more than intellectual assent. It doesn't have an exact English translation but it has to do with believing a thing so profoundly, so surely, so completely that we are willing to act and take risks based on that belief. It is total intellectual assent **AND** the action which arises out of it.

It is owning a belief so completely that it becomes part of who we are.

It is believing that you can push me across Niagara Falls on a tight rope in a wheelbarrow and then getting in that wheelbarrow.

In other words, It's **faith**.

This, says the gospel writer, Mark, is the entire message of Jesus boiled down to a single independent clause. Everything else in the New Testament is commentary on this one sentence.

If we read this sentence, think about this sentence, accept and own this sentence, make it part of who we are, we will see that it is **GAME CHANGER**.

And, just in case you doubt that, Mark gives you two examples of it in the next four verses.

FOUR GAMES CHANGED

First, we see Simon (Peter) and Andrew fishing.

Jesus says to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." No, it just doesn't work for me either. I grew up singing that song, too. What does Jesus say? "I will make you fishers of men." (KJV) Yeah.

But the point is what they do.

"And immediately, they left their nets and followed him."

And in the next verse he sees James and John the "sons of Zebedee." They, too, are fishermen and their name is a beautiful play on words that means "Sons of Thunder," the name of a popular Zealot band at that time. And he called them and "they left their father Zebedee there in the boat with the hired men and followed him."

They ran up against a game changer – **the** game changer -- and they could not resist.

They left behind the two most important things in the ancient world – family and a way to make a living – to follow Jesus.

The good news of God as it comes to us in Jesus Christ is not just an intellectual proposition with which we are asked to agree. It is not simply a good idea that we are asked to implement in our lives whenever it's convenient. It's not just a story that we are asked to memorize so we can tell it to our children and grandchildren at bedtime.

It's a game changer. And the game that it's trying to change is our lives.

The only question for us is, "How will we respond?"

OUR GAME CHANGED

Will we leave our nets behind?

Lots of neat stuff in those nets: Old traditions and rituals. Opinions and ideas. Personal perspectives, popular prejudices and peculiar preferences. Wants we have called needs and needs we have created, ourselves. Memories and grudges.

The fragility that makes us easy to hurt. Insults and hurts we have received and carried with us for years. Callouses that make us tough and mean. Guilt and self-loathing over the hurts we have caused. And stuff. Things. The car we thought we needed, the house we can't walk

away from, the job we always wanted, the achievement the accomplishment the attainment we thought we couldn't live without.

If we want to follow Jesus, we have to accept that he's a game changer and we can't drag our old nets into a new game.

Will we leave Zebedee behind?

Can we walk away from the man whose name means thunder? Can we turn off the parent tapes that slather us with guilt about all the things we should do and ought to do? Can we walk away from our own guilt and anger, our fear and doubt and just leave it all there on the beach like they did?

Because, if we are going to follow Jesus, we have to accept that he's a game changer and we can't drag all that old stuff into a new game.

The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of God is at hand.

It's a new game, brothers and sisters.

Welcome to the team.

AMEN