My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Eternal God of our Epiphany bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

As we heart in our Children’s time, we humans need a LOT of encouragement in our journey of life, from our first steps when parents would hold their arms out to get us to come to them, to learning about the Little Engine that Could or Thomas and Friends that both say….what…? (I think I can, I think I can). It gets harder as the world says we can’t, should not, or puts up structural and economic barriers that make our lives harder than they might be, and when we get to our later years looking back, we can’t believe we made it this far.

We fall easily into despair without encouragement. This isn’t just an American thing, it happens to all cultures, and all peoples have stories that place our lives in larger settings, reveal patterns of human behavior, and give us truths to live by that contribute meaning and value. One of the best books of stories that we have is the Bible, isn’t it? They tell us about a bunch of folks who behave good or badly, and their relationship with God, who invariably comes along with a message similar to Oliver Hardy of the silent film era: “Well, that’s another fine mess you’ve gotten us into”. But God loves us anyway, and although there are consequences, most of the ones who try to do right by God are blessed. Or killed.

But one thing’s for sure. Those who do right by God can look at themselves in the mirror and know that their lives have meaning and purpose. And God is their encouragement.

In the first part of the Book of Jonah we know that he tries everything he can to NOT go to Ninevah as instructed by God, fearing he will be killed if he tells them the city will be destroyed. But after the whale incident (which is an allegory that disobeying God is not really an option) he goes there and what happens? The people understand God’s message is here, is now, they believe it, and they change their ways, from their leader down to every person, and what happens? God says what he has said when people follow God: ‘Thank you. All I wanted was to impress upon you things were going so badly they couldn’t have turned out well. But just do what you should for yourselves and others and all will be well. OK?’

Our Gospel reading parallels this story. Jesus tells us all we need to know about God’s ways and our lives in verse 15. The time has come (the fullness of time is here and now, we don’t need to wait); the Kingdom of God is here and now (don’t think one more sermon or Bible study will give you any additional revelation, you have all you need); repent (which means literally turn around, or change your ways, and start living the Way), and believe the Good News (which is that God is here, near, and in your life in all circumstances).

That’s it. You have it all available to you. Do you believe?

We just don’t believe that we can do it. Sounds easy. But it’s really hard. And even in the Gospel we see what happens to folks who follow God’s ways before Jesus tells us what we need to know: In verse 14, we learn that John the Baptist is arrested. And later on, he’s killed for being faithful to God’s sovereignty.

George Jetson’s dog Astro probably summed up my response for most of my adult life: “Ruh-oh, Rorge.” We want certainty that only the good stuff will happen to us. We don’t want to struggle mightily, or get arrested, and certainly not killed. But while that is a possible outcome, I don’t think it’s the likely one. We’re asked to try. And if we’re serious about trying, that’s what we commonly know as a “paradigm shift”. Paradigms are beliefs, concepts and structures that govern our thinking, and consequently, our behavior.

You have heard some folks call this a “world view”, how we see larger patterns and respond with individual actions. Paradigm shifts happen when our previous beliefs become full of holes and the patchwork ‘fixes’ we rationalize just don’t work, and we start to lose our reality with ourselves and our friends. Shift in thinking that might have been weird or impossible once now seems the only way forward. It seems that in America, individually and as a group, we’re at one of those times, doesn’t it? What kind of beliefs, values, and systems could change humanity and save our world from a pandemic, climate change, social injustice, and income inequality? We need a framing story which we can start to tell our friends, sure, but also ourselves. A framing story gives us direction, values, vision, and encouragement for our life. We talked about this last week: who are we? Where did we come from, who put us there or helped us there? What’s going on? Where are things going, and what should we do?

Brian McLaren, one of my preacher friends, says that if our framing story tells us that the purpose of life is for us to accumulate as much stuff and get as much pleasure as we can from that stuff in the maximum number of minutes of our short lives, then we have little reason to care about others, manage consumption, or share anything with anyone. If our story is that we are competing for scarce resources with each other as people and nations, we’ll not be all that motivated to collaborate for reconciliation. Conflicts on intellectual property, trade, fair wages, and mineral and water rights are likely to continue. Things like awareness of other peoples’ struggles for justice and asylum, institutional discrimination, availability of COVID-19 vaccines to poorer countries and such are not even on the radar, because in this world view, what takes away from ‘me’ and given to ‘thee’ is inherently flawed.

But if our framing story tells us that we are creatures free to choose and made by a all-knowing, loving God, who wants us to pursue peace, compassion, justice, mercy, and care for all that has been created and for each other, what does that say? Our lives can have renewed meaning and purpose if we align ourselves to these things that God dreams for us, these same things that Jesus taught us, the virtues of our hearts that the Holy Spirit sustains in us as our “better angels”.

Now we’re cookin’ with gas.

Our lives individually and our society collectively can take on a very different direction and our world can become a very different place.

Those who pay attention to politics know we are in the midst of a paradigm shift, where the old ways of doing things are just not working, and new ones are being created. Ultimately, these shifts boil down to how we see treating one another—as resources to be manipulated, or as persons to be listened to and appreciated. Let’s imagine if we learn to live more in harmony talking with, not at, each other. Rediscover the value of neighbor helping neighbor, and then remember what that feels like.

If we had one story that remembered our creation, that we are all created from dust and returned to dust and in the few years we’re here together we understood that makes us all equal and to fight for that equality, not seek economic and social division of our own creation. Imagine if peace and well being were not only possible but normal. Imagine if we could live to restore, rather than punish, each other’s transgression because God forgives all transgressions first…remember the Lord’s Prayer? We ask mercy for ourselves. Why can’t we extend that further to everyone we encounter?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Jesus invites us to turn around and believe. But WE, not God, have to make the first move to fulfill Christ’s vision.

Jesus came to banish stories of violence and harm, not repeat them. Instead of domination, he invites us to service and self-giving through reconciliation. Instead of revolution or revenge, he invites us to non-violent resistance. Instead of scapegoating and ethnic cleansing, he invites us to mutual respect, hospitality, and welcome. Instead of a competitive story of accumulation, he invites us to stewardship, sharing, generosity, and abundance of enough for all God’s creation.

Instead of isolation, Jesus invites us to be work together for the dignity of those we don’t know or whom we think may not be worthy of our minds and heart’s attention. And instead of leaving the oppressed in stories of victimization, Jesus invited us with visions of hope, faith, and love to change the world.

Think about it. When we’re trapped in a world of winners and losers (because as selfish people we think we’re winners, after all) the Jesus story isn’t interesting because there’s no game to play, no competition.

But in the now, turn around, Kingdom of God we believe in, we still win. Just not at the expense of anyone else. Our hearts yearn for a new story of love, not hate, of creativity, joy, and love. We wait for a new story to not just tell, but start to live. This day and every day. And for that , thanks be to God, Amen.