

"Living for More Than Survival"
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church
Pastor Ben Heimach-Snipes

Goodmorning! My name is Ben and I am the pastor of Morgan Park Presbyterian Church. Welcome! Welcome visitors, welcome members and friends, welcome children! It is a blessing to be with you in God's house today! Let us now enter into the Word of God through prayer.

Change our hearts oh God
Make them ever true
Change our hearts oh God
May we be like You.
Amen

Genesis 24:58-67
Matthew 11:25-30

Have you ever experienced the feeling of Survival mode? What is it exactly? In your life, in your work, in your family relationships, in your church? What are the symptoms or signs of "survival mode?" It can be stressful. The anxiety and uncertainty of survival can cloud the mind from seeing beyond the current obstacle. It can, however, be very useful to have a survival mode response when your survival is in question.

When visiting a friend's house last week, I drove up in my car checking each building on the block to find the right address. I knew from our recent conversations that a young man had been shot and killed right outside their apartment building, so I looked on at the hot pavement in front of me with both humility and fear. As I pulled over to park on the street, a woman ran up to my car with a smile on her face and to my surprise, she opened my passenger door and jumped in the car! As my confusion settled, I realized that she thought I was there to be her client, and she explained that she was willing to share her body with me in exchange for financial compensation.

I became very aware of how vulnerable this situation was for both of us. Now face to face with a woman I didn't know inside my car, I tried to respectfully explain that I was not looking for her. "No thank you ma'am. I am just parking here to visit my friend's house. I'm sorry about the confusion."

After convincing her that I was really not looking to experience prostitution, she changed her focus and asked, "Is there anything you can give me? Really I have nothing. I don't have anything. Please."

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As she inched closer to me, she began to cry.

My survival mode had been activated since she started reaching for my car door. Was I safe? Was she here alone? Or was she inching closer to me to rob me or hurt me? Was she working with other people, now walking by on the street?

Out of fear for my own survival I said to her, “I am sorry, but I am going to have to ask you to get out of my car. All I have are these coins here. I’m sorry it isn’t much.”

Without any additional struggle, she left me and thanked me for the coins. The moment of vulnerability was over and I was left in my car alone.

We had both survived the encounter, and I don’t believe I could have expected to have any goals beyond that. But the experience left me feeling her raw emotion and still feeling vulnerable. While I knew I was not in a position to help this woman in the moment, I hoped she would some day find the support to move beyond just trying to survive. I mourned the relationship that we could not have in that space of survival.

What is the purpose of survival mode anyway? It is activated in many situations where we think our lives are threatened. We protect the ones we love. We protect ourselves from pain. The burden of change. The feelings of loss and unfulfilled dreams.

When living in survival mode, we run out of time to mourn the losses in our lives. The holes in our hearts left by family and friends who exit our lives, die when we still need them, or disappoint us in unexpected ways.

When living in survival mode, we forget it is an option to grieve when our habits and rituals are lost unexpectedly - when we retire, when we are let go from meaningful work, when our bodies can no longer take us to the places we wanted to go, when we don’t have the means to plan beyond the next meal.

When living in survival mode, we can get burnt out running the church, caring for each other, making it through the daily grind. We run out of energy to remember to say goodbye, to celebrate our accomplishments, to mark when change is coming, to take a sabbath.

For people in the church the word sabbath can be hard to define. Sabbath is a day of rest, but also a day to worship God, a day to welcome the stranger, a day to have a worship committee meeting, a day to care for the needs of other family members, or a day to plant tomatoes in the garden.

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I was trying to define survival mode and now I am unsure about sabbath as well! Being in survival mode seems to make it difficult to know when sabbath might come. Who will relieve us? What would happen if we didn't show up? People rely on us just to survive. Our sabbath can wait - or as my freshmen architecture professor said, “You can sleep when you're dead.”

We can adapt for survival mode. Survival seems pretty important!

If I greeted you this morning by saying, “You survived!” What feelings might that conjure up in you? A feeling of accomplishment? Did you just run a marathon or compete on American Idol? Perhaps a feeling of embarrassment: Does the pastor think I am incapable of staying alive? Or perhaps a feeling of relief: I am one of the lucky ones that made it through the chaos of the world for another week.

As much as we might celebrate survival in various aspects of our culture, survival is a pretty low bar for humanity. While surviving is a tremendous burden, it is also just the beginning in terms of God's blessings for us.

Jesus' message today comes directly following his instructions to the disciples to go out to share the good news that “the kingdom of God has come near.” Jesus message today comes after he warns his disciples of the coming persecution and chaos that will come. Jesus message comes after those in power reject John the Baptist's message of strict spiritual disciplines and repentance. Jesus message today comes after John the Baptist is arrested and locked up in jail awaiting trial.

John worked so hard to prepare people for the coming of the kingdom, and he is repaid with suffering at the hands of the state. It is no wonder that he sends messengers to ask Jesus “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” “I made so many sacrifices for you, and now you party with sinners and the unclean? Is this really what we have been working toward? Are you really the messiah?”

John worked so hard when he first discovered God's call on his life and found a way to live that out in his context. John was so alive with passion when he said to the people in the wilderness, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It seems so long ago now that he baptized them with water. All has been stripped away. The excitement and passion are gone.

From prison, he sees other prisoners taken away to their deaths. His vision of God's righteous kingdom seems so far from sight. The crowds no longer gather to follow him or protest him. So

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many changes. So many losses. John’s survival is in question. Survival mode begins to set in: “Jesus, are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

I’m sure John the Baptist was not the only one wondering if Jesus was the one who is to come - the messiah, their savior. It seems most of the people following Jesus from town to town and meeting him on the streets to seek healing and forgiveness were also just trying to survive. Perhaps living their whole lives in survival mode, not sure if they would make it to the end of the week.

Jesus assures these survivors with signs and miracles - with healing and renewal. But Jesus knew that if even John the Baptist was worried, that it would take more than the miracles of God to help people break free from a lifetime of living in survival mode.

Jesus responds to the anxieties of the people by saying, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus invites his crowds of followers into discipleship - many barely surviving as peasant farmers in the Palestinian agricultural society - by saying “take my yoke.” These farmers would have been familiar with the yokes they used to tie oxen to their plows - usually a wooden brace around the neck that allowed the labor of the animal to be captured to nurture the land for new growth - turning the soil to prepare for planting seed.

Jesus invites his impoverished followers to labor with him, exchanging their work for his, exchanging their burdens for God’s burdens, turning their lives over to Jesus.

Jesus invites us to let go of our labor for survival. He invites us to let go of our anxiety to worry about our next meal. He invites us to let go of our need to control the threats to our survival. He invites us to be set free from the goals socialized in us since first encountering this world we live in: let go of the desire for wealth, the desire for status, the desire for power and even the desire for survival.

Trust in God who is gentle and humble, and your labor shall be made light. Accept the yoke, the burden of Jesus, and embrace the worthy task that puts the soul at ease. Our most fruitful and productive labor is precisely that which brings our souls closest to God.

But what is this divine labor? Isn’t this yoke a metaphor for something? How do we know when our labor is part of God’s plan or just another act of survival?

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In our changing world our community is also being transformed. Like John the Baptist, our labor of love in the past may no longer be possible. We may find ourselves in a new uncertain environment. In fact part of our work may be mourning the losses of what we no longer do - even the work that brought us joy and felt right. Those things may not be part of our lives any more and it takes real work to celebrate those things and let them go.

I can't even imagine the kind of losses that Rebekah experienced in her transition from living with her family to becoming Isaac's wife in our story from Genesis today. She met the servant of Abraham at her well and now in a day's time has been asked to leave everything and everyone she has ever known to start a new life with someone she has never met in a mysterious land.

How does Rebekah take on the restful yoke of humility and gentleness?

She discerns God's call from within herself by listening to the voices around her. She imagines the possibilities in her life instead of focusing on the risks to her survival. She trusts in God's call and God's claim on her life. She is called and responds, "I will." She says yes to God's call.

Her family also moves beyond survival. They have loved her and nurtured her into being and want her to succeed in life. They give her the choice to go or to stay and trust in her voice and God's guidance when she makes a choice. She receives a blessing from her family not unlike God's blessing and covenant for Abraham:

“May you, our sister, become
 thousands of myriads;
may your offspring gain possession
 of the gates of their foes.”

In blessing her, Rebekah's family looks beyond the individual life of their sister, their child, and connects her to the larger narrative of God's plan. In Jesus, we connect this plan to the kingdom of God. We might connect our individual choices to say "yes" to God to the universal narrative of God's kingdom of justice and love being realized in our midst. If we prayed for blessings like Rebekah's family, we might imagine a thriving and creative beloved community rooted in our own actions to follow God's call. "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads."

Rebekah had an arduous journey across the desert to experience all the feelings associated with leaving her family behind - along with everything and everyone that she had ever known - to begin a new life - transitioning from daughter, sister and friend to wife, mother, comforter and protector.

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What might that journey in the desert feel like for you? What have you lost? Who has not been able to join you in this new season of your life journey? Who have you said goodbye to? What grief has been left untended? What burdens might you turn over to God?

Like Rebekah, we can listen for when God asks, “Will you go?” and prayerfully respond, “I will.” We can discover the easy labor found under the yoke of Jesus, humble and gentle.

How does this yoke feel? How can we stop laboring in survival mode long enough to even recognize whose yoke we are carrying? How can we recognize the labor of God’s kingdom for this time and place?

Emilie Townes identifies this yoke as the labor of unconditional love: “demanding that we share the rich rewards of God’s grace and mercy with others. In doing so, we are called to live out of our possibilities and not our shortcomings.” We are called to invest our time in discernment - listening for the possibilities for love found in the hope of God.

We are called to trust that we will survive with Jesus - that we are given new life in Jesus that is sustained, not by bread alone, but by faith.

Let us take time to listen together for God’s calling. Let us turn over our burden of survival to God. Let us experience the grace of Jesus Christ anew this day. Let us journey together under the yoke of Jesus.

Amen.