

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Third Sunday after Epiphany
Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Can God's Mind Really Be Changed?

The story of Jonah and the whale or Jonah and the big fish is one of those Bible stories that has taken on a life of its own for many. It's a fanciful, farcical and fantastical story. It's about God's call to one of the prophets, the prophet's resistance, God's persistence, and God's triumph. It all takes place in just 4 short chapters in one of those books tucked away at the end of the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament.

Some of you will remember first hearing this story when you were in Sunday school as children. It has all the elements that make for a good children's story. It has a man who gets himself in trouble, a big fish who comes to his rescue, a big belch, a changed man, and a happy ending.

Perhaps some of you are not familiar with the story of Jonah. So let me summarize it since the reading that we have from the book of Jonah today comes after some big events early in the story.

The story opens with God calling a man named Jonah to be God's prophet to the people of a city called Nineveh. God wants Jonah to go to this great city and call its inhabitants to repent from their wickedness. Now to those who are familiar with the stories of God's call of prophets from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, this call story is both typical and surprising.

It is typical in that the response of the one being called to become a prophet is to actively resist the call, which is the case with Jonah as we will soon find out. The call to Jonah is a surprising one though in that God is calling this prophet to go to a place outside of the Hebrew people to call for repentance. The city of Nineveh is in a foreign nation. Its inhabitants are not Jewish as are the Hebrew people. So in some ways, even though Jonah's resistance to God's call is similar to the resistance of other prophets called by God, Jonah's resistance is perhaps more understandable in that God is asking him to go into foreign territory—even enemy territory— and have the audacity to call these non-Jews to repent of their wickedness. In some ways Jonah's resistance is along the lines of that he would rather die on his own terms than to die at the hands of the enemy.

So again, God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh. So what does Jonah do? He books passage on a ship that is going to Tarshish. Tarshish is in exactly the opposite direction of Nineveh. In fact Tarshish was about as faraway in the known world of the time from Nineveh. Jonah's reaction to God is 100% resisting God as fully and strenuously as possible.

As soon as the ship gets out to sea, a furious storm is stirred up by God that threatens the ship on which Jonah is sailing along with all the other mariners aboard it. So furious was this storm that the sailors aboard began crying to the various gods that they worship, begging for mercy from this storm—all to no avail. As the storm strengthens it becomes clear that they are going to perish. That's when the captain of the ship finds Jonah below deck fast asleep. He shakes Jonah awake and begs him to pray to his god for mercy. Eventually it becomes known that Jonah is the cause of this calamity. The sailors are terrified of God who is causing this deadly storm that is threatening all of them. The sailors desperately ask Jonah what must be done to appease this God of the Hebrews.

This is what happens next. "[Jonah] said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord,

have done as it pleased you.’ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging.” (Jonah 1:12-15)

It’s one of those made for the big screen moments. One moment the sea is raging, the wind is blowing, water is everywhere, men are screaming, the ship is about to break apart, and the next moment, there is a dead calm with a glassy sea with Jonah overboard, slowly sinking to the bottom of the sea.

And then almost as a postscript or afterthought we read, “But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah.” (Jonah 1:17)

See what I mean about this being a great children’s story? At least one that perhaps should be told not as bedtime story but rather in the daytime. For it leaves one in suspense as Jonah is seemingly rescued by this almost bigger than life fish.

Well the story continues with Jonah in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. A long enough time that Jonah comes to his senses and has a change of heart as to his response to God’s call. Jonah prays to God over the course of his enfishment and in the course of that extended prayer God chooses to give Jonah a second chance, and we read, “Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.” (Jonah 2:10) That’s the part of the story that appeals to preteens—the part where the fish vomits and Jonah is on dry land a bit disheveled from having been in the fish’s stomach for so long!

So with this background, we come to the passage that we’re focusing on in today’s service. It is Jonah chapter 3, verses 1-5, and 10. Here God’s word.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:1-4, 10)

So again in the scheme of this story, this turn of events is rather remarkable if not surprising. First of all, Jonah pulls himself together this time, and heads off to Nineveh, probably just as sure as the first time, that it would be a disaster, that he would be perceived as a threat and likely jailed, or worse. But having learned his lesson the first time he resisted God’s call, he proceeds as instructed by God and heads right into the city proclaiming the message God had instructed him to proclaim.

And much to his surprise, the people of Nineveh respond to God’s words delivered by Jonah and they turned from their evil ways. These foreigners, these non-Hebrew, non-Jews hear the word of God from Jonah and respond favorably. This, my friends, is indeed a most surprising turn of events in this story, and indeed in all of the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament. “God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”

To some it may seem surprising if not curious that God changes his mind. It kind of flies in the face of the all-powerful, all-knowing, omniscient God for who and with who there are no surprises. But then again, the Jewish audience for whom the scriptures were intended would not find this part of the story surprising, since there are numerous other such events where God is influenced by the behavior

or advocacy by his prophets. It's not so much that God can't change his mind since God can truly do whatever God wants to do since God is truly sovereign over all time and space, over all of history. So yes, God can change his mind—particularly as the events are told and written by God's people in such a way that they can be understood.

As surprising as this change of mind might strike some, the much more striking surprise here is that God's message was being shared with the people of Nineveh at all. Again, they were not part of God's Hebrew people. They were not Jewish. They were not understood to be under God's auspices and yet, God sends his prophet Jonah to this people. And not only does Jonah deliver God's message, the people of Nineveh respond favorably.

My friends, if we stop and think about this, we realize that this flies in the face of the idea that God's grace and mercy being extended to the Jewish people wasn't expanded until the coming of Jesus. Isn't that the conventional wisdom—that it was with the coming of Jesus in the incarnation of Christmas and the message that Jesus shared in his life and ministry that it becomes clear that God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, and redemption is for all people?

For sure, this is indeed the message that Jesus shared over and over again during his ministry, and it is the message that his disciples continued to share and spread throughout the known world. It's the message that has been handed down to us in our day. And it's the message with which we are entrusted as God's disciples and ambassadors today.

This time of the church year, after Christmas and before we move into our Lenten preparation for Good Friday and Easter, is the time when we proclaim the light and enlightenment that came into the world with Jesus. That we turn to the Old Testament prophet Jonah today is one of the ways that we are reminded that the good news of Jesus is actually good news that has been with us from the beginning itself. A few weeks ago, we read that incredible passage from the first two verses of the first chapter of John's gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." (Jn. 1:1-2)

This story of Jonah is a powerful testimony to this truth. And it's a reminder to us, a humbling reminder to us, that we must remain open to the deeper and more profound depths of God's love for the world and its people. We are not American Christians who relate to African Christians and to Asian Christians, and Latin American Christians, and European Christians, and Down Under Christians. No, we are Christians, all of us, united in the bond of love and grace given to us in Christ who has been with God from the beginning.

Now there is one more part of the story of Jonah that often gets overlooked. Jonah was not at all happy that God took mercy on Nineveh. Even though they took heed of the words that Jonah had uttered on behalf of God, Jonah was actually angry over this turn of events. It was as if Jonah didn't or couldn't understand how the God of the Hebrew people could find it within himself to extend grace to those beyond the Hebrew people. Jonah actually hoped for the destruction of Nineveh by God. But God is not moved by Jonah's displeasure and anger. And the book of Jonah ends with these words attributed to God in a rhetorical question, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11)

How wonderful it is that God is mysteriously merciful and abounding in steadfast love that surprises us over and over again. Let us go from this place today astounded again by this amazing love of our sovereign God.