

## THE DAY GOD CHANGED HIS MIND

The book of Jonah is a satire reminding us that prophets can go bad. The author has a whale of a good time admonishing a prophet who refuses to do his job. The story begins with these words, “Now the Word of the LORD came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it: for their wickedness has come up before me.” Most of us probably know how the next part of the story goes. Jonah did **not** want to follow God’s direction. So, Jonah got on a boat and went in the opposite direction of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire—a harsh and cruel empire that defeated and decimated the Northern Kingdom of the Jews—Israel. Jonah wanted nothing to do with God’s command...he refused to be obedient to God’s Word and fled to Tarshish. However, there is absolutely no where that a person can run from God. No matter where we go, or where we sail to, God will find us.

I’m sure you all remember what happened. Many of us learned the story in Sunday School. Jonah boarded a ship to run as far away as Nineveh as he could. While he was sleeping, a great storm came upon the sea. The sailors on the ship were all afraid. They prayed to their respective gods for deliverance. When they found Jonah sleeping in the hold of the ship, they woke him up and demanded that he pray to his God. Jonah then confessed that he was the cause of the storm and told the sailors to throw him overboard. They didn’t want to do this at first, but the storm continued to get worse and the ship was in immediate danger, they consented and through Jonah overboard.

Well, immediately, the storm stopped, and the sea became calm. The ship was saved and all its crew members. Even Jonah was saved...by a huge fish that swallowed him up whole. He hadn’t escaped God, however. He spent three days in the belly of the fish praying. After his long and sometimes satirical prayer, the fish spits him up onto dry land.

That’s where our passage begins this morning. Jonah is recovering on the beach after being thrown up by the fish when God says, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

There was a problem, however. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. Who could blame him after all? Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. Assyria deserved God’s judgment. The empire was a long time enemy of Israel—the leadership was cruel, heartless, and violent. The empire had crushed and humiliated Israel and stripped the Israelites of their land and culture. They had conquered the Northern Kingdom and deported many of the Israelites into captivity. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and deliver God’s message to them.

Later in the story we find out why. Jonah was afraid that the message just might work. He was afraid the Ninevites might just listen to his warning and then repent. He was afraid that if Nineveh did repent, then God, being God, would forgive them.

For years, Jonah was on the side of the Israelites—the good guys—the Jews. The Assyrians were the bad guys. He did not want to give them the opportunity to repent—to literally turn around from their evil ways. What would happen if they did just that?

Well, after three days in the belly of a whale, Jonah must have been weary, and he gives in. Jonah was plunged into deep waters and during his time in the water, he repented and consented to follow in God’s ways. He was baptized—in a big way. But he still does his prophetic duty begrudgingly.

Jonah heads off to Nineveh, which the Bible says is “an exceedingly large city.” According to our story it took, three days to cross the city on foot. That would mean it was at least 60 miles in diameter—now that’s a big city. Remember, this story is a satire, and it is not meant to be taken literally. The author is using a great deal of poetic license in his writing.

Jonah goes to the edge of the city and delivers a one sentence sermon—five words in Hebrew. He had no jokes, no illustrations, nor pithy slogans, just these words...” Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

There...he did his job. He did what God asked him to do as quickly as he possibly could. What he may not have known was that the word “overthrown” in Hebrew has a double meaning. It could imply destroy, but it’s second meaning was “to change.”

The response to his five-word sermon was the greatest in the entire Bible. The people of the 60 mile wide city responded. They all began to repent, to fast, and to put on sackcloth (a sign of penitence) from the youngest to the oldest. Even the King, who probably heard the sermon second hand, leads the repentance. In fact, even the dogs, cats and the cattle joined in the fast. Can you imagine—everybody giving up food, Rover and Fluffy included and praying to the God of the Israelites after a five-word sermon from a disgruntled Jewish prophet!

Well, the LORD saw the immediate response of the people of Nineveh. God heard their cries of repentance. Our story states, “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 God did not do it!”

God changed his mind—God repented! That’s an unusual turn of events. We are often taught that God does not change—God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. But the story of Jonah shows us that God is free to change. The King of Nineveh hoped that if the whole city repented, fasted, and wore ashes, then the Israelite God might change his mind. It worked! The king believed that the actions of his people might persuade the LORD and cause God to alter his terrible decree. This might be the most amazing facet of this story; God is a God who is free to change his mind and turn from punishment. God is free to be gracious to those who are far off, who are not even God’s people—even to those who are simply evil. This is good news, but also challenging news. Even nations that commit evil acts can be forgiven and can change their ways in God’s eyes. (*Connections*, Year B, Volume 1, p 202).

God changed his mind. The LORD heard an honest and sincere repentant cry from the inhabitants of Nineveh and changed his mind. He did not destroy them like Sodom and Gomorrah. At least for now, they had a reprieve. They were safe due to the graciousness and mercy of God.

It is just this love and mercy that saved Israel and Judah many times throughout their history. Often the people did what was evil in God’s sight, but God’s steadfast love and care prevented their destruction.

It is interesting to note, that it is just this love, this level of graciousness that made Jonah steaming mad! He was indignant and furious that his preaching was successful. He was angry with God that God changed his mind and forgave the Ninevites. Jonah pouts, “I knew this would happen.” He basically told God, “This is why I tried to high tail it to Tarshish in the first place. I knew you were a God who was merciful, forgiving, a lover of losers like those Ninevites. I knew this would happen. You even forgave their cows for crying out loud!”

This comical satire of the Old Testament tells us something about the nature of God and the nature of humanity.

Jonah did not want to forgive the Assyrians, his enemies. He could not find it in his heart to absolve them of their past wrongs. We all struggle with forgiveness. We build up grudges; we put up walls; we learn to hate our enemies and those who are different from us. And we struggle to examine ourselves and our own part in the struggle. Jonah refused to own up to his hatred.

Friends, our nation has been in turmoil for months. This past election almost tore us in two and led to an attack on the center of our democracy--our capital--just two weeks before the transfer of power from one president to another. In order for us to move forward, we must forgive. We must move on; we must unite and remember what our democracy is all about. Let us remember God’s ability to forgive, to change God’s mind and learn from it.

We are all children of the Living God. God loves each and everyone of us and is thrilled when a wayward child repents and returns home. "For God sent the only son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him." God is able to forgive and urges us to forgive.

Jonah was unable to. Remember the story of the Prodigal Son. The ending has the gracious father outside of his home where a party was taking place, attempting to invite his oldest son to come and join the festivities. This parable has some common elements to our Jonah story. The father forgave the prodigal son. The LORD forgave the Ninevites. The end of the Jonah story finds God attempting to explain his behavior to Jonah while the end of the prodigal son story has the father attempting to explain his behavior to the older brother. In both of these stories, we are the listeners and are left hanging. Did Jonah and the oldest brother finally repent of their sin? Did Jonah finally accept God's forgiveness of the Ninevites? Did the oldest brother finally come inside to the party in honor of his youngest brother's return?

Each of us needs to complete the ending for ourselves, for our own lives. Who is an enemy in your own life? For whom do you still harbor anger, hatred, and resentment? Have you asked for forgiveness for your part in the dispute whatever it may be? God forgives those who are truly repentant. Do you? How does your story end? How will the story of this election end? May God have mercy on us all. AMEN.

Jonah 3: 1-5,10