

“GOD DOESN’T GIVE UP ON US”
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20
A Sermon by John Thomason
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As we move headlong into a new calendar year and a new presidential era, what I detect in many of our hearts is a sense of urgency. You and I are enduring what seems like an endless season of suffering and separation, anxiety and uncertainty. We want action as quickly as possible to stop the pandemic, revive the economy, heal a divided nation, and return to some semblance of normalcy in our personal lives. The issues we are dealing with don’t just feel important to us, they feel urgent.

As it turns out, all three of today’s Scripture readings are marked by a sense of urgency – a feeling that a crisis is at hand and that time is short to respond to the crisis. In today’s Old Testament lesson, Jonah prophesies to the Ninevites that they will meet their doom at God’s hand in only forty days. In the reading from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus proclaims that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). A couple of decades later, the apostle Paul counsels the Church that “the appointed time has grown short . . . for the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:29, 31).

In all three of these biblical texts, the situation being described is urgent. Whether the time of crisis is near or already at hand, faithful action is called for. God is intervening in history to judge and to save, which calls for an immediate response from God’s children – a response of repentance. God is bringing about a change in the world which requires a change in the lives of individuals. The good news is, if we’re willing to change, God will show mercy and bring us to the fulness of our humanity.

This is the message God entrusts to the prophet Jonah to convey to the Ninevites; and, make no mistake about it, God has given Jonah a tall order. Nineveh is the capital of the evil Assyrian empire. The moon god and his consorts continue to be worshiped there, and the Assyrians persist in their ferocious foreign policy against weaker nations like Israel. If ever a people need to change their ways and get right with the one true God, the people of Nineveh need to make such a change and do it now.

An Israelite named Jonah is called by God to be their change agent. And what is his response? “They’ll never change.” Jonah writes off the Ninevites as too wicked and stubborn to renounce their sins of idolatry and injustice. He regards them as hopeless cases, beyond redemption. What’s the use of traveling all the way to Nineveh and issuing a call to repentance to scoundrels like these? Jonah believes he would be wasting his breath and wasting his trip, so he cancels the reservation God makes for him and runs the other way.

It’s easy to criticize Jonah for being disobedient to God; but in all fairness, his attitude about the Ninevites is something many of us can understand and even identify with. In our hearts of hearts, we are skeptical about the capacity of human beings to change their basic natures, their ingrained temperaments, their entrenched behaviors. We invoke maxims to support this belief: “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” “A leopard can’t change his spots.” This seems especially true of the worst dogs and leopards – not animals, of course, but people – people who are captive to destructive habits or who are downright evil like the Ninevites. “They’ll never change.”

What makes this attitude so attractive is that it is not without foundation. In the realm of criminal justice, we all know about recidivism – the likelihood that those who offend the law will

become repeat offenders. In the realm of addiction, there is the phenomenon we call relapse – the inability of addicts who stop their compulsive behaviors to stay stopped. In the realm of family relationships, we know that abusers of spouses and children have difficulty breaking the cycle of abuse. We hear people who are in trouble make fervent promises that they will henceforth stay out of trouble, and we often respond with doubt and cynicism. We may have a glimmer of hope that they will keep their word and turn their lives around, but our suspicion is that “they’ll never change.”

Or, we may take things a step further like Jonah does, moving beyond cynicism to demonization. Jonah is so angered by the behavior of the Ninevites that he regards them as fatally flawed human beings, as permanent enemies of God and God’s people. In Jonah’s view, the people of Nineveh are hardly worthy to be called human; they are demons who deserve to be destroyed.

If this reaction doesn’t sound familiar to you, it should. Demonization is a common practice in American society today. Many of our citizens are splitting into opposing camps, grinding political axes, and engaging in culture wars. But they are doing more than this: they are also branding those who disagree with them as traitors and infidels. It is one thing for us to differ with others on how they view the world or how they vote at the polls; it is another thing for us to view those with whom we differ as diabolical, to engage in name-calling and character assassination, to resort to extreme measures to reject others’ points of view and promote our own. We readily recognize this kind of behavior in the mobs that stormed the Capitol building on January 6, but do we recognize this tendency in ourselves? How easy it is to look at a man carrying a Confederate flag through the Capitol rotunda, or another man wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words “Camp Auschwitz,” and think to ourselves, “They are just a bunch of Ninevites; to hell with them; they’ll never change.”

There is another dimension to Jonah’s response, one which we might be prone to overlook. He is obviously saying about the Ninevites, “They’ll never change”; but he is also saying about himself, “I’ll never change.” At one level, he says these words in defiance – “I will never change my mind about these scums of the earth. My feelings, my convictions, and my prejudices are set in stone. The Ninevites don’t even deserve a warning about God’s judgment, much less an invitation to receive God’s mercy. It violates everything I stand for to give these wicked people a chance for redemption. This is who I am, what I believe, and how I feel, and I’ll never change.”

But perhaps, at another level, Jonah also says these words in despair. He hears God’s call to take the “high road” to Nineveh, to speak the truth in love, to choose forgiveness over vengeance, to be a more worthy servant of God. But he has grave doubts that he has it within himself to do this. He doesn’t believe in the possibility that he might become a different and better person. Jonah not only gives up on the Ninevites; he also gives up on himself. “I’ll never change.”

It is now January 24; almost four weeks have passed since countless people made their New Year’s resolutions. You know the drill: stop overeating, start exercising, stop procrastinating, start meditating. By now, many of the promises people made to themselves have been broken and discarded. Do you know the number one reason why people abandon their New Year’s resolutions? It’s because they have a cynical view of themselves. They start out with the best of intentions to break bad habits and acquire good ones; but they fall off the wagon one time, or perhaps a second time, and then say to themselves, “There I go again. I don’t have enough personal integrity or will power to fill a thimble. I’ll never change.”

And they are partially correct in their self-assessment, if the story of Jonah and Nineveh is any indication. Resolutions would be an exercise in futility for a man like Jonah. He lacks the inner character to love his enemies; he lacks the self-discipline to do the right thing. The Ninevites are even

worse off: they lack the moral compass to recognize their wrongdoing; they lack the moral fiber to become a righteous people. Left to their own devices, neither Jonah nor the Ninevites will ever change.

And yet, this story has a surprisingly happy ending: Jonah eventually answers his calling; Nineveh eventually repents of its murderous, blasphemous ways. Neither party really has it within themselves to change for the better; but, lo and behold, they both change. How does this happen?

Well, this story is not about heroic human effort or strategies for self-improvement. This story is not even primarily about a reluctant Jonah and a rebellious Nineveh. This is a story about God – about God’s infinite patience and persistence, about God’s relentless pursuit of people who are running in the opposite direction. It is a story about a God who doesn’t give up on people who have given up on themselves, a story about healing and hope winning out over cynicism and despair.

Jonah doesn’t believe that he can change – from a hater into a lover, from an escapist into a prophet. Nor does he want to change. He is content to cling to his biases, stew in his juices, feel smug about himself, and demonize the Ninevites. Jonah has no desire to change because he doesn’t believe that his enemies can change. In fact, he hopes they won’t change. He wants God to punish them for their wicked, warring ways. And there can be little doubt that they deserve such punishment.

The wonder of this story is that God has better plans for both Jonah and Nineveh. God pursues Jonah and finally persuades him to reach out to his enemies, and God pursues the Ninevites until they finally allow themselves to be reached. God loves both Jonah and Nineveh – just as God loves all of us – with a love that will not let us go. God doesn’t give up on those who have given up on themselves, and God doesn’t give up on those we have given up on.

This story prompts me to ask, are there areas in my life that I want to change, but can’t? Do I strive to be free of these hindrances, but instead feel bound and trapped? By the same token, are there areas in my life that I don’t want to change, but should? Am I hanging on to behaviors and attitudes that bring me comfort but are actually doing harm to myself and others? To be painfully specific, are there people in my life whom I regard as Ninevites, people whom I view not just as different but as disgusting, people who stand for everything I stand against, people whom I have written off as worthless and hopeless?

Six days before Americans inaugurated a new president, we arrived at the anniversary of another political milestone – January 14, 1963, the day that George Wallace was inaugurated as governor of Alabama. Those who were alive back then well remember the infamous words Wallace spoke on that occasion: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” That phrase became the rallying cry for those who opposed integration and the civil rights movement. Wallace continued to sow seeds of racism, fear, and hatred in a later campaign for the presidency.

What many people don’t remember or realize is that George Wallace changed his tune later in life. He expressed regret that he had made those remarks in his inaugural speech, calling it his “biggest mistake.” He changed his views on segregation and actually became a reconciling figure in race relations. In 1982, when he ran for governor for a fourth and final time, he won 90% of the black vote. As governor, he appointed a record number of African-Americans to state positions. He even crowned the first black homecoming queen at the University of Alabama!

George Wallace’s transformation was gradual. It began when he first became governor and a Jonah appeared on his doorstep. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. responded to Wallace’s inaugural address with a series of speeches. In the first three months of 1963, Dr. King traveled to 16 different cities, speaking about the need to take action against the injustices of segregation and calling George Wallace

“the most dangerous racist in America.” Later that year King gave his historic “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial. The only person he referred to in that speech was George Wallace, though he did not mention Wallace by name: “I have a dream,” King said, “that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of “interposition” and “nullification” – one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

At the time, George Wallace undoubtedly heard those words, but he didn’t heed them. Then a few years later, another Jonah appeared on his doorstep, and this time he was a more receptive listener. While he was campaigning for the presidency, Wallace was shot by a would-be assassin and left paralyzed for life. He was at rock bottom and utterly lost. His daughter Peggy commented that “he had to be saved by someone other than himself.” Sure enough, while he was recuperating from his injuries, George Wallace had an unexpected visitor in the hospital – Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman ever elected to Congress. When she sat beside Wallace’s bed, he asked her, “What are your people going to say about your coming here?” Shirley Chisholm replied, “I know what they’re going to say, but I wouldn’t want what happened to you to happen to anyone.” George Wallace was overwhelmed by her caring and empathy, and her willingness to face the potential negative consequences to her political career because of him – something he had never done for anyone else.

Later, a black campaign worker asked Shirley Chisholm why she reached out to Wallace. She replied, “You always have to be optimistic that people can change, and that you can change, and that one act of kindness may make all the difference in the world.”

On a Sunday in 1979, George Wallace made an unannounced and unexpected visit to a black church in Alabama. Except for an attendant who rolled his wheelchair to the front of this sanctuary, he was alone. He was given an opportunity to speak, and this is what he said: “I’ve learned what suffering means in a way that was impossible before. I think I can understand something of the pain that black people have come to endure. I know I contributed to that pain and I can only ask for your forgiveness.” As he was leaving the church, the congregation began singing “Amazing Grace.” It was testimony to the fact that God never gave up on George Wallace, and that God never gives up on any of us.

I can’t speak for you, but I know there are places in my life where I get stuck – where I want to change but can’t; and other places in my life where I’m just stubborn – where I need to change but won’t. At times I simply feel powerless to change. Two slogans from the 12-Step program have been immensely helpful to me. The first is: “God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.” The second is: “I can’t God; God can; and I’m going to let him.”