

## *God, Changing Minds*

A sermon on Jonah 3:1-10 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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More than any other book in the Bible, the story of Jonah is a plain old great story, the kind we like to tell while sitting around a campfire. Jonah's story is not a long one, only 48 verses altogether, yet it is beautifully crafted, full of humor and excitement and conveys some of the richest, most powerful ideas about God in the Hebrew Bible. We often describe God and faith in God in absolute terms, using words like perfect and unchanging. Jonah's story helps us understand that being willing to change, to take the big turn in the road, is a big part of being faithful.

In chapter 1 God speaks to Jonah, telling him to go and proclaim God's message to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. Assyria is one of the mighty powers threatening the nation of Israel. Jonah doesn't even respond, but runs to the shore and hops on a boat bound for Tarshish, which is about as far away from Nineveh as you can go and still have your story included in the Bible. God creates a great storm. Eventually the sailors, who are not Israelites, conclude that Jonah's God, YHWH has caused the storm because Jonah has fled. With Jonah watching at a distance, the sailors pray to YHWH and row as fast as they can to bring the ship to shore. But the storm only grows stronger and eventually they agree with Jonah's suggestion and throw him overboard. This has the intended effect of calming the storm.

Chapter 2 is just as dramatic. Jonah is swallowed by a great fish. He travels in the belly of the fish for three days. This gives him ample time to pray, something he hadn't bothered to do while everyone else was praying on the ship. He uses his time to compose one of the most beautiful psalms in all of scripture. Then the fish vomits Jonah back onto the shore, presumably somewhere much closer to the city of Nineveh.

We read chapter 3 a few minutes ago. Chapter 3 is a new beginning for Jonah. This time when God speaks, Jonah follows God's directions. He walks to Nineveh and begins to give God's message, warning the people that they must repent or the Lord will overturn their city. The inhabitants are obviously receptive, because even before he arrives in the center of the city Jonah's message has spread and the entire population has repented. Somewhat after the fact, the King makes a royal proclamation, following the lead of his people, and shows his agreement by leaving his throne and sitting in a pile of ashes. Then we have great images of the people showing their complete repentance by wearing sackcloth and somehow managing to clothe, not only their herds of cattle, sheep and goats, but even their flocks of birds with sackcloth. Now that's something I'd like to see!

Chapter 3 ends with the central event of the entire story. Just as the Ninevites have overturned themselves, repenting of their evil ways, God overturns his previous decision, and changes his mind about the evil consequences he had planned for the city. This is the central event because this is a story about change. It's a story about people changing their ways and their minds, and about God changing God's way and God's mind. The only person who doesn't change in the story is Jonah.

We can tell Jonah hasn't changed because in the final chapter, chapter 4, Jonah is very angry. He feels like God has sent him off on a wild goose chase, because God never punishes the Ninevites. Jonah says, *I knew it! I knew this would happen! I knew at the very beginning that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love. God, you are driving me crazy, so please, just kill me right now!* Of course, God doesn't kill Jonah. Instead God asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Just like in chapter one, Jonah refuses to respond but walks away from the city, out into the desert.

God obviously wants to continue the conversation because he spares Jonah from the burning sun, miraculously creating a vine to shield him. Jonah is happy about the vine but he doesn't talk to God, so God causes a worm to eat the vine. Jonah's anger returns quickly and he says, "It would be better for me to die than to live." God repeats the question, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah replies, "Absolutely! I am angry enough to die." The story ends with God's final question: "If you were so attached to this little vine, something you did not create, shouldn't I have compassion for this great city of over 100,000 people plus many, many animals?"

The book of Jonah is one of my favorite ways of understanding that God is the source of our being, including the source of our good humor. I chuckle every time I imagine those birds and beasts wearing sackcloth. I laugh out loud at the thought that Jonah is considered to be a prophet. While it's true that Jonah speaks God's prophetic word to the city of Nineveh, in the end Jonah is the only person in this story who doesn't get it. Jonah is the only person who doesn't get God's message: Repent! Follow me! Grow into a new creation! Change!

The sailors change. The people of Nineveh change. The King of Nineveh changes. Even God changes. For a while, it seems like Jonah is changing. He begins to pray after he is swallowed by the giant fish. He follows God's directions when God gives him a second chance. He makes the journey to Nineveh and proclaims God's message. But unlike the people of Nineveh, deep down inside Jonah refuses to change, to repent, to grow.

The people of Nineveh don't just change on the outside, they let their hearts be changed as well. You can tell that, in spite of all of the walking he does and all of the words he speaks, Jonah refuses to be changed on the inside. You can tell because after all the storms, the drama, the excitement, the herds of animals being clothed in sackcloth, Jonah ends up in the same place, and in some ways a worse place, then when he started. He won't even respond to God. He is so angry he just wants to die. Most amazing of all, Jonah is angry because of God's compassion.

In the first chapter of Genesis, we hear God say, "let us make humankind in our image". This often leads us to picture God as a person with very human characteristics. We sometimes picture God as a very old man with a flowing white beard, since God has obviously been around for a very long time. I'm not sure why we don't picture God as a very young baby, with incredibly smooth, soft skin, since God will obviously be around for a very long time to come.

This would also help with one of the main ideas in the story of Jonah, because babies are constantly growing and changing. This is a story about God changing minds. God changing the minds of the sailors, God changing the minds of the people of Nineveh, and God changing God's mind.

Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, inviting a bunch of common fishermen to follow him and begin a new kind of work, fishing for people. In the same way, God is in our midst, inviting us to follow Jesus' way, to turn from some of our old ways, to be changed by God's love.

Sometimes, like Jonah, we are stubborn. We say to God, "No, I won't go. I don't want to change. I like my way better." In my experience this never works. Whenever I try this I end up feeling angry. I refuse to let myself be changed and I grow angry. I refuse to grow into something new, and I grow angry. I refuse to open my eyes to acknowledge that God's grace, compassion and love are so big I'll never really be able to comprehend them, and I grow angry.

Our refusal to change always leads to frustration because we are created in God's image. We are created to change and grow. God shows compassion and grace by doing something new, a new decision or a new way. As creatures made in God's image, we join in God's compassion and grace and share God's love with the world by doing something new.

If you are a bit nervous about making the big turn, about making the big change, you are not alone. This is where I can really understand Jonah's stubbornness. He is all alone. But you are not, at least you don't have to be if you are sitting in this church here today. You are like Simon and Andrew, like James and John, working your way through life along with some friends. You might even consider these people to be like brothers or sisters in Christ.

Won't you join hands with each other, maybe even with a newcomer like me, and take the next big turn in the road together? This is what we were created for. We were created to change. We were created to grow into something we've never seen before. Thanks be to God.