

“Changing God’s Mind” – Jonah 3:1-5, 10

I’m sure most of you have either watched or participated in one of those word games in which someone says a word and you respond with the first word that comes to your mind. A couple of quick examples might be “British” ... “Columbia”; or “bacon” ... “eggs”. Okay ... let’s try it with a biblical topic. I’ll say the word, and you say the first thing that comes to mind ... “Jonah” ... _____. I hope that those of you who have printed copies of this sermon might listen as I am to see if the spontaneous answer is “whale.”

It seems only natural that people in church would respond to the word “Jonah” with “whale” and so I feel I have to immediately begin this sermon with an attempt to dispel two misunderstandings people have about the Book of Jonah in our bible. The first of these is that the text doesn’t say “whale”, it refers instead to a “sea monster.” But more importantly, the story of Jonah, the message of the book, is not about Jonah’s encounter with whatever it was in the water. That was simply one part of the story, and a minor part at that. And so I need you to set the association between “Jonah” and “the whale” aside so you can hear what the main message is.

Let’s do a quick review then of the story of Jonah, and see if that main message starts to come through a bit more clearly. It begins with “the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amitai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’” To give you a clue as to the significance of this calling to Jonah from God, you could consider yourself getting the same message to go to downtown Tehran (in Iran) and proclaim loudly on the main street there that God was mightily displeased with the citizens of that city. Much the same impact might be found in say, downtown Kabul in Afghanistan, or any of the other cities in which significant numbers of shall we say, “ardent believers” can be found. I’m sure you can imagine the impact of such madness ... ranging from a quick and violent death to a slow and lingering and violent death!

Well, Jonah was no fool, and he could imagine exactly the same kind of response if he were to heed this call and go to Nineveh, and so he does what any ‘sane’ person would do ... he sets out in the other direction to go to Tarshish. The book really could be re-titled “The Adventures of Jonah”, or maybe “The Misadventures of Jonah.” In today’s terms it would be called, “Jonah: the reality show!” We follow the brief and exciting adventures of that reluctant prophet through wind and storm and frightened sailors and raging seas until he is at last thrown overboard – in the name of God, we might note ... not the last time that God has been blamed for human violence. Jonah repents in a long hymn of thanksgiving and is spit back on dry land.

Chastened, he enters the dreaded city of Nineveh and cried out loudly that the destruction of the city was only forty days away ... and he is devastated by the outcome. The people of the city put on sackcloth and ashes, and repent of their ways. God’s reaction? He “changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.” Jonah’s reaction? He sulked! He threw a snit and sat on a hillside waiting to see what would become of the city. God then taught Jonah another lesson about God’s grace, but we don’t know how that lesson turned out, for the book ends there.

So, there are a couple of things that we are intended to learn from this story (even if Jonah was a little slow on picking up the same messages.) Of course there’s the message that God has power over not only prophets and sailors but over the elements of nature. There’s a message that while ordinary people can choose their own directions, for prophets ... not so much! But the most startling message, and the one that made Jonah angry, was that God is capable of “changing his mind.”

Now that may seem a tiny thing deep in the context of the Book of Jonah, but that God can change his mind is a hugely important understanding. It is even a dangerous understanding, because proclaiming this understanding taken directly from the bible in the midst of a group of “bible-believing” Christians will almost always get a reaction similar to Jonah’s. There are some – many, even – in the Christian faith who will argue (especially in a misguided attempt to ease grieving) that “everything is part of God’s perfect plan.” They go on to say that while we can’t necessarily understand this, every single little tiny thing, every flap of a butterfly’s wings, is the playing out of God’s unbelievably detailed and complete cosmic plan. There are many problems with this particular understanding and belief, but the one I like to use to get them to start to think about the consequences if this were true is to ask them, “then why do you bother to pray?” (Doing that has much the same effect as throwing sand into a gearbox!)

You see, the problem is that if indeed every – and they mean every – thing is predetermined by God, then it really doesn’t matter what we do, or think, or say, because it’s all been laid out for us. If that is true, we are just images on some cosmic DVD, playing out our lives with no choices, no options. The choice of salvation through our faith becomes meaningless if we have no real choice. Even our worship would then be nothing more than God echoing back to God empty praise and thanksgiving (“thank you, Me, for all the good things I have done!”). If nothing could be changed, there would be no point in prayer. The only prayer that would make any sense at all would be “please God let me accept all this!” But the biblical record is clear, and here is one example, that God’s mind has been changed, can be changed, by the choices people make. The people of Nineveh repented of their ways, and “God changed his mind.” Throughout the books of the Old Testament, in Exodus, Numbers, Jeremiah and Jonah to name but a few there are numerous citations of the times God changed his mind and calls to the people to change their ways to bring about that change of God’s mind. Even, or perhaps especially, the New Testament bears witness to the power of prayer to change God’s mind. The episode recorded in Acts 8 between Peter and a man named Simon who practiced magic in Samaria ends with Simon asking the apostles to “pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you said might happen to me.” There would be no point to this prayer if the outcome was already rigidly fixed against that Simon. Paul was constantly exhorting people to pray, as in this to the Thessalonians ... “To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith” (2Thess 1:11).

That is the real power of the message in the story of Jonah ... that God’s mind can indeed be changed. That is the essence of prayer ... that God’s mind can indeed be changed. We live our lives in this wonderful ongoing interchange with God. To be sure, God has hopes and even dreams for us and for what we can become, but even so we have the complete freedom to choose otherwise. God does not abandon us and will stick with us, poking us and prodding us toward a destination that is best for us, just as God poked and prodded Jonah against his will. That is the miraculous grace of God, that his love is there for us even as we twist and turn and duck and weave and try everything we can to do it “our way” ... and his love is there to pick up the pieces of us and put them back together again as we indeed do it “our way.” God hears our prayers, and better yet listens to them, and wherever possible and appropriate grants those prayers. Sometimes the answers come right away, sometimes there’s a lot of complex stuff that has to happen before our requests and petitions can be granted, lots of times our requests get turned down literally “for our own good.” But a foundational part of our faith is that God’s mind can be changed by prayer. That’s biblical. That’s Christ-like. That’s for real. All it takes is prayer.