

## When God Changes His Mind

Sermon 73 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 20, 2020

Jonah 3: 10 – 4: 11

I can still remember it like it was yesterday. The first major theological confrontation between my mother and I about the nature of God. Well within the traditions of church patriarchs, matriarchs, and first-year divinity school students, I had learned some interesting facts about the Bible and about God, and I'd come home just looking for any opportunity to share those lesser known treasures with my unassuming family. I'm not sure what started the conversation but I do remember that I needed my mother to know that the words to the old classic hymn, *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*, were wrong.

I was in the earliest stages of my theological education, the part often referred to as "dis-orientation" or the first steps into the "desert of criticism." In those first moments when students realize that the world of theological inquiry and imagination is so much more than we'd ever imagined, often, young naïve students like myself jump to the incorrect conclusion that just because we've learned some new facts about the Bible, or Jesus, or the ancient world... the faith of those on whose shoulders we stood, was all wrong.

In the kitchen where my mother and I were having this theological confrontation, I focused my attention on the last line of the third verse where Smith writes, "and wither and perish but *naught changest Thee*."<sup>1</sup> You see...our discussion had been around the nature of God and whether or not God could or did ever... change.

Or more specifically, whether God ever changed God's mind.

You should all know that I tell this story today with my mother's permission and that those theological discussions around my mom's kitchen island still go on, nearly every time I go home for a bit. I have so much still to learn from her.

So when I read the scripture reading for today I found great delight in the words of Jonah 3, verse 10 which clearly state: "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." (NRSV)

What follows is an exaggerated tale of a sulking prophet who doesn't seem to appreciate God's change of mind. Perhaps, Jonah had already made up his mind about the people of Nineveh. They were the perpetual outsiders, people of the world, not people of God. They were lost and misguided; no use in trying to save them and risk getting caught up in their backwards thinking or behavior. Jonah knew what he thought about the Ninevites before he ever went to the city to preach his one-sentence sermon. A sermon that was never supposed to have the profound impact on the people that it had. It seems like Jonah was just trying to do the minimum required so that God wouldn't stick him down into the belly of another wild animal. From all appearances, Jonah's mind was made up about the Ninevites. He knew all about them, their wicked ways and godless lifestyles. They were

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<sup>1</sup> "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise." *The Baptist Hymnal*, #6, 1991.

beyond reach, beyond hope, beyond compassion, and certainly beyond salvation. At least as far as Jonah knew.

In the French language there are two different verbs for “know”. *Savoir* means to know something with our mind. To study and learn, to intellectually understand something. *Je sais que la terre est ronde*. I know that the earth is round. I can say this because I’ve seen pictures from outer space, I’ve read books about it, and I suppose because I trust the scientists who say it’s true. But there’s another verb that translates similarly in English. *Connaitre*, meaning to know something from experience or within the context of relationship. *Je connais cette maison*. I know this house. Or, *je la connais*. I know her.

Sometimes I wish we had two different words in English to describe these two different ways of knowing.

We live in a time that enables us to “know” so many things. Through our own research, 24-hour news cycles, through 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>-hand accounts from friends, through logic and common sense... we know a lot. Of course this is *savoir* knowledge that isolates our *knowing* to that which we can learn on our own. The pandemic continues to open us to this kind of knowledge as we’re isolated in our homes most of the time and when we’re not strictly isolated, we are trying our best to keep others at safe distance.

What we are lacking, however, is the opportunity to learn relationally. To get out into the world and meet people, to listen to them, to learn from them, and to begin to acquire *knowledge* that is more like the French verb *connaitre*.

Because of this necessary distance we have from one another and from our neighbors we have yet to meet, I wonder if we aren’t predisposed to Jonah-like behavior?

You see, Jonah *knew* all he needed to know about the Ninevites. That’s why when God told him to go there the first time, he ran in the other direction. Then after the encounter with the great fish, when God persisted in calling him to go to Nineveh, Jonah conceded but the scripture says he walked throughout the city preaching one of the shortest sermons ever recorded “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4). Now I don’t know much about preaching in the ancient world, but I’m not sure that sermon would receive high marks in any modern-day homiletics class. Could it be that Jonah wasn’t all that interested in being Nineveh’s pastor and prophet? Could it be that he had no interest in listening, and learning... getting to know the people who lived in the city? Was his mind already made up?

Much to Jonah’s chagrin and our delight, the people of Nineveh were indeed moved by that prophetic sermon and they immediately repented; they turned their lives around and cried out to God.

Luckily, God heard the cries of the people and as the story goes, God changed his mind about them.

I wonder, if Jonah had taken the time to know the Ninevites (relationally)... might he have been able to avoid that embarrassing tree and worm incident we read aloud just a few moments ago? If you missed it, read Jonah chapter 4.

Throughout scripture, we encounter a God who already knows (*savoir*) all there is to know about us. God created us, shaped us into the beloved creation that we are today, God knows us better than we know ourselves... one might say God quite literally *writes* the book of our lives. And even still, our scriptures insist that God wants to know us relationally. And, in the context of that ever-unfolding relationship with God, God learns about us and we learn about God. Perhaps even, from time to time, God might experience surprise, delight, and maybe even a change of mind about who we are becoming.

I don't know about you, but I find great hope in the possibility that God might not be through with me yet and that God might remain in relationship with me long enough to see if I might grow a bit as we live in relationship with one another.

Makes me want to sing, *Amazing Grace*, a few more times.

In the same way, God's church is in relationship with God. Together with one another and with God we are learning about one another. Sometimes what we thought we knew – based on our own intellect, understanding, or experience – needs to be changed by what we are learning in the context of that relationship. Think about church history a bit: we thought we needed a priest to interpret scripture, then we met non-priests who did a pretty good job of that... we learned and we changed our minds. We thought slavery was divinely ordained... but we met people who'd experienced it and discovered that we needed to change our minds about that. We thought God was calling us to egregious acts like the Spanish Inquisition and the Crusades against our Muslim neighbors... but then we realized we were wrong about that too and we needed to change our minds. More recently and within our "Baptist" house we have experienced a change of mind about many things, most notably on the ability of divorced people and women to serve as ordained deacon or ordained minister. More often than not, these changes of mind didn't come because we read a book or because of some individual divine revelation. No, these changes emerged out of relationship, vulnerability, and humility.

We got to know women who could preach and serve as spiritual leaders. We experienced God using them to bring forth new revelations of God's kingdom here on earth. We met people going through and trying to move forward after divorce and realized that God was present with them, working within them, and giving them the tools to serve God's church that others might not have. God persisted in relationship with these whom the church had silenced and we learned that we needed to do the same even if it meant we had to change.

Church scholar and author, Brian McLaren, teaches us that when we follow the movement of the Holy Spirit, we will have to change our minds and change our ways. He also points out that sometimes, when the Spirit calls us toward change, the church is tempted to escort the Holy Spirit right out the door. But... the Holy Spirit will often, "find an unlocked window and sneakily enter [back in] ... stubbornly refus[ing] to abandon the church even

when [it] quenches the Spirit... While this [...] is humbling for the church, it also holds out hope that [...] with the Holy Spirit's help and by the Grace of God - [the church can be] perpetually reformable."<sup>2</sup>

Don't you just love the possibility of being perpetually reformable? Always growing and learning in relationship with God and neighbor... we might even get to change our minds about some of our ideas? We might come to learn that those people – over there – doing that stuff we think is unreasonable and unacceptable... we might learn that those people aren't so bad after all... and that if God desires to be in relationship with them, we might want to do the same?

I wonder if our relational knowing might lead us to intellectual and spiritual transformation?

We live in a time in which change is seen as a bad thing. It's embarrassing to admit that we were wrong, and it's risky to enter into relationship with people we've already written off.

To Jonah, and to the rest of the Israelites, Ninevites were the epitome of "other". They were outsiders for whom there was no hope. They were wrong, amoral, disgusting, unworthy of the prophet's precious time.

But to God, they were worth everything – even a Divine change of mind.

Jonah's response in the story certainly is laughable. He is unable to see that God's love and grace extends to the Ninevites and he is unable to accept it when God saves them too. And rather than rejoicing in God's expansive love of all people, Jonah pathetically pouts and whines as he sits on the sidelines overlooking the city.

Perhaps Jonah provides for us a negative example of our own prophetic calling. And maybe God's commitment to ongoing transformation through relationship and concern for the outsiders might cause us to consider if we might also need to have a change of mind?

There is no shame in admitting when we've been wrong.

So it seems to me that as we read and consider the ancient story of Jonah, it might do us well to ask of ourselves and our church... where is our modern-day Nineveh? Where are the places and who are the people about whom we have already made up our minds?

And as these places and faces come to mind, maybe this time we might choose to draw near and experience some relational learning... lest we might find ourselves in the company of the old prophet Jonah, alone on a hillside, bitter, and angry enough to die.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren. *A Generous Orthodoxy*. 34