

Changing God's Mind

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying,
“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city,
and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.”

So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh,
according to the word of the LORD.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city,
a three days' walk across.

Jonah began to go into the city,
going a day's walk.

And he cried out, “Forty days more,
and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And the people of Nineveh believed God;
they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small,
put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did,
how they turned from their evil ways,
God changed his mind about the calamity
that God had said he would bring upon them;
and God did not do it.

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Jonah 3:1-5; 10

January 21, 2024

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I.

Today's sermon is, I admit, a bit "non-linear." You are all smart people, however, I am confident you will figure it out; each in your own way. Focus less on the individual trees, and more on the forest that they create.

Having said that, let us begin with a story. For those who are newer to the church or have stumbled upon our Youtube channel, you should know that *all* my stories are true. Frankly, I do not possess the kind of imagination required to make up half of the stories I tell, though today's story is certainly well within the realm of plausibility; which is exactly what makes it so particularly hard to believe.

II.

In October of last year, Linda and I were contacted by Tiffany Soricelli about the possibility of staying with us for a few nights in early November. As was noted in our church newsletter, Tiffany was named as a Trustee at SUNY Potsdam, and needed to come to the area for a meeting. Tiffany, her husband Rob, and their two children Juniper and Rory live outside of Schenectady; Rob is a wonderful public school music teacher and Tiffany runs Virtuoso Asset Management which has our church as a client. We have known Tiffany for over 20 years, initially as a college student in our choir and, later, as our church's Choir Director. I married Rob and Tiffany in our sanctuary, and both their kids were baptized here. Over the ensuing past two decades the Soricelli's have been our guests on several occasions. So, when she called this fall to see if she could lodge with us again, we of course said, "No way!"

III.

Actually, we were *delighted* to host Tiffany and pleased she reached out to us. Though it has been *our* home for the past 25 years, Linda and I have felt a joy in being able to share the manse with church folk at any opportunity; it is, after all and in many ways, *your* home as well. So, with the weekend of Tiffany's stay upon us, we packed up and set out for the cottage; we imagined

as a working parent raising two young children, Tiffany might appreciate a little “alone time.” Which she most certainly did, until she didn’t.

On Saturday morning she called us to ask if Rob and the kids could join her for a little family adventure. “Of course!” We said. I mean, in for a dime in for a dollar; right?. Moreover, we know the challenge of raising a family, and the fun of giving kids a bit of an adventure. So it was, that the entire Soricelli family came to stay at the manse the first weekend in November.

IV.

That Sunday, before church, Linda went over to the manse to say hello and to visit a bit with the family. It is at this point our story takes an interesting and, at least to Linda and me, a fairly humorous turn. Straight out the shoot, 8 year old Juniper garners Linda’s attention and says, “I have some questions for you!” Which, if you are old enough to remember, is right out of Art Linkletter’s, Kids Say The Darndest Things.

Apparently, the prior 24 hours was a sufficient span of time to give Juniper the opportunity to make a *thorough* assessment of our home; to take the full measure of things and get the lay of the land, if you will. She was interested in how certain things came to be in our lives, how they came to be in specific places in our house and the meaning of those things; particularly with regard to some nick nicks on the dresser in our bedroom, a set of prayer beads, and an old photo of Linda’s family when she was 5 years old.

V.

Young Juniper is the very definition of a precocious child; she is clever, intelligent and quick witted, with a persistence which is to be admired. So much so, that when I was pondering today’s sermon text from Jonah 3, Juniper immediately came to mind because, the story of Jonah should bring us to the very same point reached by Juniper: “God, we have some questions for you!”

While the story of Jonah is nothing short of amazing, it does pose an extremely vexing proposition: that we humans can change the very mind of God and, in doing so, bend the course of history and, more importantly, our own lives. Which, if we are being honest, doesn’t really square, or line up, with the rest of our orthodox, theological understand of an all-knowing and

all-powerful God who will be who God will be. However, what if we *were* to take seriously the lesson the story of Jonah has to teach, that we humans are capable of changing God's mind?!?

VI.

To summarize the story of Jonah, God has an issue with the great city of Nineveh, the flourishing capital of the Assyrian Empire and, apparently, a very wicked place of unrelenting violence, extortion, and brutality. God calls Jonah as a prophet, to go to Nineveh and preach to them a message of repentance. However, this is the *last* thing Jonah wants to do. Nineveh has it coming and *should* be punished, as far as he is concerned; and, quite simply, does not want to give an "out" to his enemy.

Instead, he boards a ship for Tarshish, which is in the opposite direction. Soon a raging storm causes the crew to cast lots and determine that Jonah is the problem, so they throw him overboard and he is swallowed by a great fish. In its belly for 3 days and 3 nights, Jonah finally repents of his own sin to God and the fish vomits him up on dry land. Jonah then makes the 500-mile trip to Nineveh and leads the city in a great revival. Rather than being thankful, though, Jonah is *displeased* (actually pouts) when Nineveh repents and God spares the 120k souls who live there; those who, in God's estimation, do not know their left hand from their right.

VII.

Our sermon text this morning picks up after Jonah has been swallowed and spit out by the great fish. At that point, the Word of the Lord comes to Jonah a *second* time. "*Alright, alright already, I'll go!*" says Jonah. When he arrived, Jonah went into the city, going a day's walk. And Jonah cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Then, something utterly remarkable happened, the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth on that very day! When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that God had said he would bring upon them. The people of Nineveh had succeeded in *changing God's mind*.

VIII.

Channeling my “inner Juniper,” I admit I have questions; one in particular. If it is the case that we mere mortals have the ability to change the mind of God, what change, or changes, would we seek? I would like to ask you to think about that for a few minutes while I proceed to slice our theological baloney ever so finely.

It is no accident that the story of Jonah appears in the lectionary at this point in the liturgical year when the Gospel readings speak of John the Baptist’s call to repentance just as God called Nineveh to repent, and just before we enter the season of Lent which will culminate in Christ’s descent into hell following his death on the cross for the same period of three days Jonah spent in the belly of the great fish.

Just as Nineveh transgressed and sinned against God and was, therefore, deserving of destruction, so, too, have we sinned and are deserving of our own destruction through the death which will eventually come to us all. However, whereas God *forgave* Nineveh’s trespasses owing to their corporate act of repentance (or change making) our trespasses are not forgiven but, instead, have been paid, or *atoned* for, by Christ who suffered their consequences on our behalf.

IX.

Did you get all of that? Ok, I’m going to ask you to keep multi-tasking for a bit longer. Keep thinking about what change *you* would seek in God’s mind, while I tell you about a conversation I had this week with my “woods hippie” friend, Mark Adams. Mark receives the weekly sermon, and was calling to speak to me about my new year’s resolution to be weirdly observant. During the course of our conversation the notion of “prophecy” arose; which, by the way, I have observed to be popping up in a number of weird ways of late.

It seems we are living in a time which evokes in many a concern for how all of this will end; the world, that is. The theological term for this is “eschatology”: the inquiry into the death, judgment, and the final destiny of humankind and the world. While many would see prophecy as *predictive*, the true role prophecy plays in scripture is as *corrective*; with the story Jonah serving as a perfect illustration.

X.

While Jonah, in the role of prophet, certainly *predicts* the destruction and final destiny of Nineveh, the real value of his prophecy is in avoiding such a future by calling people to *correct* intent and action in order that such a destiny might be avoided and a new and different future might unfold. Truth be told, most of the so-called “prophecies” folks like to trot out are pretty much plain as the nose on your face kind of things. If we live and act so as to allow and foment violence, injustice, mistruths, fear, and discord in defiance of God’s plan for this world, eventually we are simply going to get all we deserve; regardless of how involved God has to become in that process, if at all.

On the other hand, if by some chance we open our ears, eyes and hearts to the changes in our lives and our world that God is, even now, calling us to, we have the possibility and, moreover, the *opportunity* to bend the course of history and, more importantly, our own lives; as those in Nineveh did that day. Which, if we will think about it honestly, is pretty remarkable. The idea that we have the ability to act and think in ways which result in the changing of God’s mind, admittedly, is very hard to believe, precisely because it is *absolutely* in the realm of plausibility.

XI.

Ok, we are almost at the end of the sermon. While I’d certainly be interested in learning what any of you might seek to change God’s mind about, today’s scripture reading points to only one thing: mercy; as in more of it, or even just a little bit. The lesson Jonah learned is one we all would do well to remember and consider for ourselves: God is ever seeking opportunities to show mercy to *any* who would pursue and accept them; with the cross of Christ being the greatest such opportunity of all.

Further, and finally, that from time to time God calls upon reluctant prophets like Jonah, and like you and me, those who know their left from their right, to invite the necessary changes for such mercy to be delivered and received. Which, having taken the full measure of things and with the lay of the land before us, is something each of us has to figure out, each in our own way; it is also something about which you may have questions. So, by all means, ask them; and maybe, together, we can imagine some answers that bend the course of history back toward God, and our own lives along the way. Amen.