

"CHANGING GOD'S MIND: the story of Jonah" -- a Sermon by Gary R. Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: Jonah 3:1-5, 10.

Text: "When God saw...how (the Ninevites) turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them." --Jonah 3:10

Every now and then you meet someone with a thoroughly disagreeable attitude who would like to re-write that wonderful verse in the 23rd Psalm which says, "My cup runneth over, surely goodness and mercy... to something like this: "My cup runneth over, what a mess!"

Senator Sam Ervin used to tell about a man in his home state who could never agree with anyone about anything. Ervin said that from the day when he found that cabbage didn't agree with him, he wouldn't eat anything else!

Jonah was the most stubborn, disagreeable, cabbage-eating prophet in the whole Old Testament. His story can be summarized in one sentence as follows: "Reluctantly, Jonah obeyed God and prophesied destruction on the evil city of Nineveh and the people repented and the great city was spared." But the story is more interesting in the details. Let's look closer and see what we can learn!

First, Jonah reluctantly obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh preaching the word. But he did not go with the best attitude! In fact, Jonah disturbs my notion of the Old Testament prophet. I figured that when God says "Jump!" they ask, "How high?" but not Jonah! God said, "Go to that evil city of Nineveh and give them the 'word'." But Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, so he jumped into a ship that was going the opposite direction.

But God is not so easily deterred. God caused a violent storm to rock the ship. The sailors were terrified and they soon figured out it was Jonah's God, angry at Jonah, who was causing the storm. They pleaded with Jonah to help them and Jonah told them that they should throw him overboard and the storm would stop. So they tossed him out and, presto, the storm subsided!

Though we might think this would be the end of Jonah, it was not for God caused Jonah to be swallowed in the belly of a great fish. I imagine one could do a lot of soul-searching in the belly of a fish. Jonah did. And he decided that if God were to give him another chance, he would indeed go to Nineveh. Our Scripture lesson opens with Jonah sitting on a Mediterranean beach having been spit out by the great fish. Perhaps the disagreeable Jonah tasted like cabbage to the fish!

A lot of people are disagreeable. There is at least a little of Jonah in all of us. For instance, how many here would be happy if God told you to spend this afternoon, not watching the playoffs, but passing out tracts to people as they deplane at Ontario International? Or, wouldn't you be miffed if you were told, like Jesus told the "rich, young ruler," that you should "sell what you have, give it to the poor" as a pre-requisite

to following him?" We know we should be telling others about Christ, we know most of us have too many material possessions, we know we should be more deeply committed than we are.

Like Jonah, we are reluctant leaders until we get God's "wake-up call." Jonah and we are something like a guy named "John" who was vacationing with his family near Savannah, Georgia. One day John was swimming along a high tide when a huge wave hit him and knocked him unconscious. When he came to, John realized he was face down in the water, near the shoreline but unable to move.

His life flashed through his mind. "This is it!" he thought. "So this is how it ends for me, drowning in the shallows of the Atlantic Ocean!" But just then a little boy spotted him. He ran to his parents. "Mom, dad, come quickly, a man is drowning!" The parents weren't about to even stir until the child made such a commotion that they had to notice the man, lying face down at the edge of the beach. The dad pulled him out of the water while the mom rushed for more help. John was placed in intensive care, but was released live and well in just a few days!

John says the accident was his wake-up call to life. He claims it was the best thing that ever happened to him. It changed his life. It changed his values, his commitments, his concerns, his priorities. It drew him closer to his wife and children; it taught him how to celebrate the preciousness of life; it made him thankful and closer to God. "I wish that wave had hit me 30 years ago!" he said.

Maybe we all need to be hit by a wave; or a three-day vacation in the belly of a fish. It would certainly give us new perspective and might help us obey if God asked us to do something!

So, again, God said to Jonah, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim the message I tell you." And though he didn't want to go, though he was still dragging his feet, Jonah knew better than to disobey. And he went and he proclaimed the Word of the Lord--a simple, straight-forward, alarming message to the evil city of Nineveh: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

That was it! That was the message, in all it's simplicity, with no flare, no glamour, no pomp and no circumstance. But it was God's Word and, even if it was not something Jonah wanted to do, he did it and it put into motion an amazing thing.

The people repented. They listened. They heard the word. They changed their low-down ways. They put on sack cloth and went without food. They cleaned up their act. In short, they repented.

The important thing to remember is that this was not Jonah's doing--it was God's doing. Jonah didn't even want to be part of it, but because God was in it and God was behind it, a great thing happened. To be God's servant: you don't have to be a great leader; you don't have to be an orator; you don't have to be multi-talented; you don't have to

have a big bank account; you don't have to be pure and spotless; you don't have to have great athletic prowess; you don't have to be a great musician--you just have to do God's will. You need to listen and respond. God wants obedience. God wants us to surrender and to serve. God can take unlikely people and make them instruments of the Kingdom!

One of God's great servants is a man named Robert. He used to stand before the crowds and say, "I have everything I need for joy!" But by worldly standards Robert was a very unlikely man to make such a bold claim. His hands were twisted. His feet were useless. He couldn't bathe himself. He couldn't feed himself. He couldn't brush his teeth, he couldn't comb his hair, he couldn't dress himself. His shirts were held together with strips of Velcro. At times his speech dragged like an old, worn-out cassette. Robert had a severe case of cerebral palsy. It kept him from driving a car, riding a bike, or even going for a walk. But it could not keep him from graduating from high school or college. Nor did his condition keep him from teaching in college and venturing overseas on five different mission trips.

Robert had a wonderful faith in Jesus Christ which led him, at times, to share his faith. His testimony led scores of people to Christ. And though he could have asked for sympathy or even pity, he chose the other path, boasting before the Lord: "I have everything I need for joy."

What an unlikely messenger for God. What a mistake we make if we do not think that God can use even us. We just need two ingredients: faithfulness and a love of the Lord.

In spite of his reluctance, God used Jonah and the people repented. **And a great city was spared.**

The text says, "When God saw...how (the Ninevites) turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them." (Jonah 3:10)

At this point we must pause and ponder over an amazing thought: "God changed his mind." God was going to destroy Nineveh but instead, "God changed his mind."

Is God an idea? Or, is God an experience? Is God to be understood or is God to be embraced? Is God someone we think about or is God someone we encounter?

Some people have a very "philosophic" idea about God, and the Scriptures sometimes speak in this way: God is wisdom. God is light. God is all-knowing, all powerful, omniscient, omnipotent, omni-present. Thus we ask: How could such a God ever be wrong? Therefore how could such a God ever change his mind since he does not make mistakes?

Other people have a very "existential" notion of God and the Scriptures sometimes

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speak in this way: God is experienced. God is known through intimate relationship. God is love. God is compassionate and forgiving. Such a God is very near. Such a God "weeps with those who weep" and "laughs with those who laugh." We are comforted by this God to whom we lift our hearts in prayer and dare, boldly to ask forgiveness or healing or even to have a change of mind.

The truth is that God embraces all these ideas. Thus we sing, "Great is thy faithfulness...thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not; as Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be. Great is thy faithfulness....Morning by morning new mercies I see."

God is all powerful. But God's power is tempered in mercy. God can handle anything, and in mercy, God usually does!

In spite of his reluctance, God used Jonah and Jonah delivered a warning to Nineveh. The people repented and God decided not to destroy them and a great city was spared.

But all this causes me to wonder just what might happen if we, like the people of Nineveh, would repent of our old ways and try to be God's man or woman in the world of today? It could mean new hope and joy, new priorities and new purpose.

A man walked by some stone masons who were doing the finishing touches on a beautiful church. One was carefully chiseling a triangular piece of rock. Not seeing where it would fit, the man asked the mason, "Where are you going to put that?" The man pointed toward the top of the building and said, "See that little opening near the spire? That's where it goes. I'm shaping it down here so it will fit up there."

That's our duty, too. We need to shape our lives down here so that they will fit up there! We do this as we listen to God, do God's will, and, where needed, repent of our old ways for God's new, good way. If God can make a change of plans, so can we, as we look to him who truly is our strength and our redeemer. Amen.