



**A Sermon from Rev. Dr. Jody Seymour, Senior Pastor
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The Sermon Text: Jonah 3:1-10

How to Change God's Mind

The story of Jonah is called by some biblical scholars a comedy or a parody - so don't get hung up on how Jonah survived those three days in the belly of the whale. You see, God is a God who loves stories. Eli Wiesel once said, "God made man because he loves stories."

The writer of Jonah used the literary techniques of exaggeration, overstatement, understatement, the use of inappropriate response, and ludicrous behavior to make his point when he wrote this wonderful story (source: "And God Created Laughter"). The story was first written to counteract the prevailing opinion by the church of the day that they were "in" and the rest of the world was "out."

Remember the old joke about heaven:

A man arrived at the gates of Heaven. St. Peter asked, "Religion?" The man answered, "Methodist." St. Peter looked down his list and said, "Go to Room 24, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8."

Another man arrived at the gates of Heaven. "Religion?" "Catholic." "Go to Room 18, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8."

A third man arrived at the gates. "Religion?" "Jewish." "Go to Room 11, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8." The man said, "I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass Room 8?"

St. Peter replied, "Well, the Baptists are in Room 8, and they think they're the only ones here."

When the story of Jonah was written, the Hebrew people thought they were the only ones chosen of God, and the rest of the world - especially those folks in Nineveh - were going to Hell in a hand basket. The story of Jonah dared to ridicule this idea with a parable that was full of extravagant reversals.

God is not only a God of ridiculous demands, but also a God of extreme and even ridiculous grace. After all, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the most hated nation of the time. They had completely destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel a few hundred years earlier. The people intermarried with their captives and they became the despised Samaritan people that Jesus sometimes used as heroes in his own stories.



It would be like saying to you today that God had a change of mind and decided to forgive Al Qaida or the Taliban if they turned to the right. If I say that to you today, are you ready to get up and leave and go see “what’s playing” down at the Presbyterian church?

Are you even willing to entertain the idea of a God who would do such a thing? And in terms of today’s theme, does God really have a change of mind? Speaking of stories and changing God’s mind, how about the boy who wanted a baby brother:

Johnny, a very bright 5-year-old, told his daddy he’d like to have a baby brother and, along with his request, offered to do whatever he could to help. His dad, a very bright 35-year-old, paused for a moment and then replied, “I’ll tell you what, Johnny, if you pray every day for two months for a baby brother, I guarantee that God will give you one!” Johnny responded eagerly to his dad’s challenge and went to his bedroom early that night to start praying for a baby brother. He prayed every night for a whole month, but after that time, he began to get skeptical. He checked around the neighborhood and found out that what he thought was going to happen, had never occurred in the history of the neighborhood. You just don’t pray for two months and then, whammo - a new baby brother. So Johnny quit praying.

After another month, Johnny’s mother went to the hospital. When she came back home, Johnny’s parents called him into the bedroom. He cautiously walked into the room, not expecting to find anything, and there was a little bundle lying right next to his mother. His dad pulled back the blanket and there was - not one baby brother, but two - his mother had twins! Johnny’s dad looked down at him and said, “Now aren’t you glad you prayed?”

Johnny hesitated a little and then looked up at his dad and said, “Yes, but aren’t you glad I quit when I did?”

That little boy figured that he had the power to change God’s mind. The big word for this is God’s “mutability.” The word mutability means, “capable or subject to change or alteration.” So is God mutable?

According to the story of Jonah, God had a change of mind about what He would do; and Jonah got so upset that God was not going to destroy Israel’s long-time enemy that he marched out of the city, sat under a tree, and sulked. As Thomas Carlyle once put it, “Jonah stalked to his shaded seat and waited for God to come around to Jonah’s way of thinking... and God is still waiting for a host of Jonah’s to come around to God’s way of loving...It was not God who needed a change of mind, but Jonah.”

I suppose I’ve tricked you a bit today by advertising that I was going to give you the secret formula that would enable you to change God’s mind. The real secret is that when we attempt to change God’s mind, we are affecting something about ourselves. We first have to ask what it is we want God to change and see what that says about us.



Jonah wanted God to stay mad at the people of Nineveh and God more or less said, “Look at you, Jonah. You want me to destroy thousands of people and the animals. Take a look at you - you ran from me...hoped a slow boat to China thinking you could hide from me...got swallowed by a whale from which I saved your sorry self...found yourself spit up on the shore, after which I let you reapply for the job of being a prophet...and now you think these folks don’t deserve a second chance. How many chances did you think you got Jonah? Yep, it’s you that needs to change, Jonah, not me.”

So is God affected by what we do and say? The answer is both yes and no. There are some things about God that will not change. God is beyond our knowing, in spite of our many efforts to reduce God to a good buddy, an American, a Methodist, a...you fill in the blank. Some attributes of God do not change and they all have to do with God’s love, grace, and mercy.

Does God feel our pain and joy? God’s special child Jesus used the story of Jonah to say to those who were listening and to us, “The only sign this generation will get is the sign of Jonah” - which was another way of saying, “Look folks, just like Jonah was in that dark belly of the fish, so I’m going to the depths for you - even if it takes three days in a grave to do it...I’m with you in this.” That was the sign of Jonah.

Jesus became a sign to tell us that we do have an effect on the God of the universe. God is not a distant idea, nor is God a God that we can capture as our own to the exclusion of God being the God of all people...even our enemies.

It was Abraham Lincoln who, when tempted to ridicule his Civil War enemies to the south as demons by claiming to have the corner on God said, “It is not my prayer that God would be on our side, but that we would be found to be on God’s side.” So as one observer trying to capture the meaning of the story of Jonah put it:

God does not play favorites
God seems always willing to extend mercy
And it seems that we do not have to be angels or saints for God to use us...
For Jonah was indeed a jerk and God used Jonah (from Rick Morley).

What keeps the story of Jonah from being a fish tale is that we can change God’s mind by being in relationship to a God who is bigger than our small images of God. Jonah’s God was too small and Jonah was afraid that the real God was much too big to fit his need to have a God who was parochial and limiting when it comes to justice, mercy, love, and grace.

The important point in the story of Jonah is not that we have in our hands an owner’s manual about how to change God’s mind. What the story of Jonah asks of us, rather, is how are we changed in our encounter with the real “big” God. As one person put it, “Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of God’s willingness” (Archbishop Trench).



When you and I pray for God to have a change of mind, we have to first look at what we are asking. No, you really can't change God's mind about who is going to win the football game. God will not take sides. You can pray to do your best with what God gave you and to not cause too much harm when you bash your opponent in the contest.

And, yes, you can point to the heavens and thank God that you possessed the talent to catch the touchdown pass – but, no, God did not throw the pass, nor does God relish in your personal victory and giving “heavenly” high-fives at the other team's loss. God's “willingness” is always for the good of God's people...and much to the chagrin of Jonah...it is all God's people, not just card-carrying religious folks.

We are Jonah-like, though, and God knows it. In times of war, we pray to gain victory for our side - but Lincoln was right, we need to pray that we are on God's side and that we will strive to be in the pull of God's willingness for what is right and just.


When we pray like we are trying to convince God to give healing to someone, we need to remember that we do not have to change God's mind about that. God always wants wholeness and healing for all God's children, but He did not stop a Jonah from boarding a ship to Tarshish when God wanted him to go to Nineveh...God did not force the ship to turn around or prevent Jonah from being swallowed by the deep darkness represented by that fish...but Jonah found that God was even in the darkness.

It was the one who spoke of the sign of Jonah, Jesus, who reminded us that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. God does not prevent angry seas, shipwrecks, and people from going their own ways. But according to God's special child who loved to tell stories about lost boys and lost sheep and Samaritans who end up being heroes instead of enemies, God is always affected by our efforts to be in relationship to God.

The reason Jesus ended up hanging on a cross was the answer to how to change God's mind. God said to us, “You may not get what you want when you come to me, but you get always get me. I am the God who feels your joys and your pains. I want you involved with me in the struggle to offer love, justice, and healing to all God's people. And if you suffer while trying, well, I've taken in your suffering into myself. I feel what you feel. I am that close to you.”

A few times a year, I share with you the poem that helped me understand how God is affected by what we do and by who we are. God is not immutable. God's love does not change, and God's desire to offer that love to all people does not change. But God' mind is changed when we come to Him with our total being because God was one of us and is present in the moment when we ask. God's mind is changed because of us and the relationship. Things happen that would not happen if we failed to step toward that relationship. Love changes God's mind.

You see, God never wanted to destroy the people of Nineveh. What changed that day were the people who stepped toward a God who wanted repentance for them. God wanted them to alter their ways. The only way the writer of Jonah figured how to say it was that “God



repented of the evil he would do.” Why? Because that was what God wanted anyway - the evil was the way the people were living.

How do you change God’s mind? You change yourself with God’s help. If you don’t get what you asked for, you will still be changed in the asking. And because of the one who fulfilled the sign of Jonah in his own three days in the darkness, even the darkness is taken in and the light will come. It may come later in room number 8 where there are more people than you can imagine, but it will come....

And now the poem that changed me because of the way it changed God:

“The Nail Torn God” by Edwin Markham

In here life’s chaos make no foolish boast
That there is some God omnipotent
Seated serenely in the firmament
Looking down on man as on a host
Of grasshoppers
Blown about on a windy coast
Damned by disasters
Maimed by mortal ill
But who could end it all with
One blast of will
That God is a man created ghost

But there is a God who struggles with the All
Who shouts across this world a
Danger call
The builder of roads
The breaker of bars
The one forever hurling back
The curse
The nail torn Christ pressing toward the stars
The hero of the battling universe