

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Mark 1:14-20

CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

The Old Testament lesson for today comes from the Book of Jonah, which is only four chapters and forty-eight verses long, and yet, it has a lot to say about the boundless mercy of God. Perhaps you remember the story of how Yahweh called Jonah to go and prophesy to the Ninevites, who were the ancient enemies of the Jews; that would be like God telling you or me to go and preach in Baghdad, Iraq the day after 9/11!

Jonah was as human as you or me. He didn't want to go so he took off in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship headed for Tarshish, but a mighty storm came up and threatened to tear apart the ship. Through a process of discernment, the sailors learned that Jonah's disobedience to God was the cause of this calamity so they threw him overboard. A big fish swallowed Jonah and he resided in the belly of that fish three days and nights. Then, he prayed for deliverance to the Lord. The Lord heard and the great fish spewed or vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Now, that's some fish story!

By the way, a Sunday School teacher was telling her class the story about Jonah and the whale. They had read the story together and were talking about its meaning for their daily lives. The teacher asked her class, "What can we learn from this story about Jonah being swallowed by the whale?" There was quiet for a moment, and then one of the students spoke up and said, "I know. Human beings make whales sick!"

I don't know if human beings make whales sick or not, but I do know that we make each other quite ill. When we read of yet another senseless tragedy at Virginia Tech, the atrocities of war, genocides, greedy CEO's, and human beings' growing capacity for inhumane actions, don't you just get sick to your stomach? I was in Richmond and Washington this past week, and I enjoyed the opportunity to read their newspapers. While I appreciated a more thorough coverage of the news, at the same time, there was more to read in the way of crimes and violence; and I found myself shaking my head, over and over, at the senseless, hate-filled actions of so many people.

And, if humans make other humans ill, just think what our sinful actions do to God. We already know from our reading of Scripture that, when Jesus approached Jerusalem riding atop a donkey, he wept over the Holy City for its destructive ways. That's why God had called Jonah to go and prophesy to the Ninevites "for their wickedness has come up before me."

There's good news to be found after Jonah was spewed from the whale's mouth onto dry land. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time" to go to Ninevah. Jonah was given a second chance – and so were the Ninevites! Jonah went and preached the shortest and the worst sermon ever recorded in the entire Bible: "Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" In Hebrew, those five words were all it took for the Ninevites to take notice, repent, and return to the Lord. They took both Jonah and Yahweh seriously for the king and the nobles, all the people (and even the animals!) repented. They fasted, put on sackcloth, and they rolled in ashes. Most of all, in humility, they believed God and turned from their evil ways of acting toward each other. The Ninevites changed for the better; they put off their old, sinful ways and embraced the new life that God offered them.

And, because they did, God changed his mind about the calamity that God had planned to send to the Ninevites. God stayed the divine plan and altered course – all because the Ninevites had repented, turned from their evil ways, and turned toward God.

It's been said that Jonah shows us a God who is not bound to rigid rules, unless it is the rigid rule that those who repent must be forgiven and restored, not overturned or turned out. Jonah shows us a God who can and will punish if words, whether gentle or harsh, bring no change of heart or behavior. Jonah shows us a God who would much rather forgive, however. (Gerald Oosterveen, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Jan. 2000. p. 25)

The claim that God would much rather forgive is certainly seen throughout the New Testament. Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee by saying, "The time is now, and God's kingdom is here; repent and believe in the good news." Jesus began by calling some very ordinary fisherman: Simon and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John. They left their nets, their father, and their way of life; they followed Jesus and changed the course of their lives for the better.

Of course, they didn't arrive "there" overnight or immediately. For the first three years, they kind of stumbled and bumbled their way along – one step forward and two backward, and vice versa. But, following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, and God's gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, these disciples changed for the better; and they were underway in becoming the very best people they could possibly be – short of glory!

We have a tendency to think of repentance as a negative. After all, who likes to dredge up the past and think about the ugliness of their lives? Who enjoys recalling the unkind thoughts, the hateful feelings, the harsh words we have spoken, or the insensitive and harmful actions we have done, or the good things we could have done (should have done, but) failed to do? Who indeed enjoys such misery as that!

But, what if we view repentance from the biblical point of view? If we could only understand that repentance is a positive part of the spiritual life. Repentance is a God-given second chance to reflect and re-examine where we went wrong; we strive to learn from our mistakes and redo the way we live by changing for the better (with God's help, of course) and setting out in a new direction. God doesn't demand perfection of us at the beginning or even the middle of our earthly pilgrimage. Perfection is reached when God brings us into the heavenly kingdom. In the meantime, through trial and error, we fall down again and again; and, by the grace of God, we repent and are forgiven. We "fall forward" – always desiring to learn from our mistakes, changing for the better, and being transformed by Christ.

John R. Claypool has helped me to see that God is more interested in growth than in our innocence, in how much we have learned from our mistakes rather than how many mistakes we have made. God does not expect us to get it right the first time, which is why the way of repentance really is a positive gift, and not a negative experience to be evaded. Claypool goes on to say that what we have been is not the measure of what we can be. We are only in chapters one and two of our life story. The rest can be different and better if we will only believe the Good News Jesus brought; namely, that repentance is not only allowed, it is encouraged by God. (*Lectionary Homiletics*, 1/94, pp 28-29)

One day a belligerent young man said to Mahatma Ghandi: "You have no integrity! Last week I heard you say one thing. Today you are saying something different. How do you justify such vacillation?" To which Ghandi answered quietly, "It is simple, really, my son. I have learned

something since last week!"

Mahatma Ghandi models for us what it means to be a responsible steward of our lives, to learn from our past mistakes, and to fail forward by growing into a better person. That is what repentance can help us to do, and with Christ living within us, we are being transformed into better persons. After all, if the Ninevites can do it, so can we!

Furthermore, if God could use a recalcitrant Jonah, and common fishermen – Simon, Andrew, James, and John – we had better believe that God can and does send us forth to help change the world for the better. We are called to proclaim, in word and deed, that a new world is being born; we can change for the better; we can get in step with the Christ; we can live a new life. It's been said that sometimes, the only solid evidence the world has that Jesus Christ is Lord, that a new age has dawned, is you!

When William Willimon was the chaplain at Duke University, he told the story about the time he went to a fraternity house to give a talk on "Character and College." He knocked on the door and a young boy of about nine or ten showed him in and took him to the common room where the fraternity was gathered. As Willimon began his remarks, the little boy climbed onto the lap of one of the brothers and soon fell asleep. Willimon said, "I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour." Afterwards, there were no questions or comments, only silence. So Willimon prepared to leave. He heard the college kid say to the little boy, "You go on and get ready for bed. I'll be in to tuck you in and read you a story."

The fraternity boy walked Willimon outside and thanked him for coming. Willimon asked him, "Who was the kid there tonight?" "Oh, that's Darrell," he said. "The fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom's on crack and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him. So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us. We go over, pick him up, and he stays with us until it's okay to go home. We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books, and stuff." Willimon responded by saying, "That's amazing. I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible." "I tell you what's amazing," he said, "what's amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else." Willimon offered this reflection: On my way back to my car that night I said to Jesus, "It's an odd way to do a revolution. Still, by the grace of God, it works." (Pulpit Resource, Jan. '06, p. 19)

God called Jonah, the Ninevites, Simon and Andrew, James and John, and an entire fraternity at Duke University; and God calls us as well to repent and change for the better. We can indeed turn from the old, sinful ways toward God and the new life that awaits us, right now and in the future! Let us re-examine our lives and resolve to change for the better – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
January 25, 2009