

2.4.07 *The God of Second Chances* Jonah 3:1-10

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Jonah's name means "*dove*." Doves are sometimes sent as messengers, particularly messengers of peace. Jonah is the son of Amittai, which means faithfulness or truth. So in the eyes of his people and his God, Jonah is named to be "*a dove of faithfulness*." He proves to be anything but that; in fact, he flies the coop in the opposite direction. Jonah doesn't want to go east to Nineveh so he sails west into a storm created by his own disobedience. God delivers him; gives him a three day time out to pray and think about his situation and that leads us to chapter 3.

"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 the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his **throne**, removed his **robe**, covered himself with **sackcloth**, and sat in **ashes**.

Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock shall taste anything.

They shall not feed nor shall they drink water. Human beings and **animals shall be covered with sackcloth**, and they shall **cry mightily to God**.

All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent **and change his mind**; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

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."

Last month, we showed the film *Chariots of Fire* which is about men running and competing to represent Great Britain in the 1924 Olympic Games. Sixty-two years later at the summer games on July 27, 1996 another runner from Great Britain, defending champion Linford Christie, was seeking to repeat as the Gold Medal winner in the men's 100 meters. Unfortunately the race didn't begin cleanly. Christie was guilty of a false

start so the runners had to resume their places in the starting blocks. There was another false start by the NCAA champion from Trinidad and Tobago. When a competitor commits a false start a yellow flag is placed on his lane number signifying that one more false start means disqualification. Everyone is allowed one second chance. The race began a third time and appeared to be a clean start, however, officials said it was not. Linford Christie the reigning champion was disqualified in his final Olympics and not allowed to run the race. His false starts were determined thanks to technology. All of the starting blocks are linked electronically with the starter's pistol. It has been determined that no human being can react in .10 or less to the sound of the pistol so anything faster is considered a false start. This technology was put in place after a race not long before the '96 Olympics in which US runner Dennis Mitchell complained he had been falsely accused of starting too soon. An official then allowed him to run the race. One of the competitors complained about Mitchell receiving a second chance. So now the decision is left to science. The competitor who complained was Linford Christie. In his desire for justice he banned the mercy he would later need at the most important moment in his athletic life. What a painful way to learn that mercy is greater than justice.

When we left Jonah at the end of chapter two, he was wet and exhausted on the beach after his time in the depths in the great fish. The Bible is specific in saying a great fish, not a whale, however, that is what most of us think of or imagine. Cathie Kroeger was kind enough to share the following Cape Cod story with me. On August 8, 1896, Captain Peleg Nye was captured by a whale. The *Register* gave the following report: "Captain Nye was out in a boat in pursuit of a sperm whale which had just been wounded and was athwart the bow, when the boat gave a lurch and Captain Nye, who was standing on the bow, was plunged head first into the whale's mouth. The whale closed its mouth and dived under the water. He soon found he had too large a mouthful and was glad to release his unbidden guest." Captain Nye lived to be more than 80 years old.

Whale stories are interesting. A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales and the teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human being because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small. The little girl stated that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible. The little girl said, "*When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah.*" The teacher asked, "*What if Jonah went to hell?*"

The little girl replied, *"Then you ask him."*

Jonah experienced God's justice and God's mercy. My mentor in seminary called Jonah 3:1 the most grace filled verse in the Bible. **"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."** God hasn't given up on disobedient Jonah, who represents all the people of God. The Lord's message to Jonah begins, **"Get up."** God's messages to people often begin with those words GET UP. If chapter 2 moved us down to the depths, chapter three begins moving up. God's mercy is upon everyone and everything we hear about. **Everyone gets a second chance.** After being down and depressed, Jonah is told to **get up** and he is given something specific to do, **"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message I will tell you."** In chapter 1, Jonah had gotten up and gone west instead of going east. Now Jonah has the opportunity to rethink his failure and his decision to flee from God. He gets a do over. You know what a do over is.

If young people are playing a game and there is a controversy, *"You did. I didn't. You did, I didn't..."* the solution may be to do it over. The person who feels vindicated by whatever action happens next will then usually say, *"See I told you so."*

Jonah gets a do over, what golfers call "a mulligan." The Lord is saying to him, *"The slate is clean now. Here are the same instructions you received before. What are you going to do?"* This time Jonah has the good sense to act obediently. He behaves like a man of God. The Lord says get up and go - and he gets up and goes. As Jonah journeys to Nineveh, let us consider the following.

The book of Jonah is located among the 12 Prophets. Eleven of the twelve are messages mostly addressed to Israel with few references to the prophet's personal history. The Prophets mostly hope people will repent of their wickedness, violence, and idolatry and turn to God to be saved, and live from then on lives of mercy, justice, kindness, love, and peace. The book of Jonah, however, contains mostly personal history and only an 8 word message in English, (it's even shorter in Hebrew) addressed to people who are not Israelites. The word prophet in fact does not appear in Jonah at all and unlike the 11 others, Jonah is disappointed when people repent and are saved from the consequences of their sins.

One time when our family went to Breakwater Beach here in Brewster, Jill and Nathan were out on the flats and I was reading while Greg was nearby. Behind me was a father with his son and daughter and the girl got chocolate all over her father's shirt. The dad said something to her about saying she was sorry, which she did very

unconvincingly. Her dad said, *"You don't sound sorry, you sound angry you were caught."* At this she began kicking sand at her brother. The father patiently said, *"Kicking sand on your brother is not going to make it better. What if I got chocolate on your shirt, what would you do to me?"* The girl said, *"Give you a spanking."* *"Do you want a spanking?"* her dad replied. *"NO."*

As they started walking toward the parking lot the dad said,

"Well you better think about what consequences you want for what you did."

And his daughter said plaintively, *"I don't want consequence!"*

She spoke for more than herself. We don't want consequences.

As Jonah nears his destination perhaps we need to consider the possibility that he didn't want to go to Nineveh because he didn't want to deliver God's word about the consequences of Nineveh's sins. Maybe he didn't want to be the bearer of bad news. Maybe he didn't want to share with people who were vicious enemies the possibility of God's mercy and grace reaching even them. Think about Jonah in Nineveh – a stranger among strangers, roaming the streets and marketplaces, urged on by a mysterious impulse, shouting over and over, *"Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* No funny stories, no illustrations, and no application – at least it was brief. Jonah's warning is not conditional, he does not say, *"Beware, if you do not repent and turn around, your city may be reduced to ashes."* His warning is precise, clear, and seemingly final. *"Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* Interestingly, the citizens of the city don't hear Jonah's words as a message of unavoidable judgment; they hear it as an opportunity for repentance and a new beginning.

As soon as they hear God's message from Jonah, they accept the message and repent. We're told all the inhabitants of the city – young and old, men and women, rich and poor, royalty and commoner, powerful and powerless, *even the animals* joined in an absolute fast from food and water, wore sackcloth and cried out mightily to God in prayer. Can't you just hear the cows and goats and sheep praying? Life in the city must have changed significantly as a result. When the king heard the news he took off his robe that symbolized his authority, and came down from the throne, which was the seat of power and control. The king wears sackcloth instead of a royal robe, sits in ashes rather than a throne and calls for a citywide demonstration of repentance, prayer, fasting, humility, and transformed behavior. The heathen king responds to God's word more obediently and wholeheartedly than Jonah and more than almost every king of Israel. The king's decree formalizes what the people have already spontaneously done.

How commendable is it that the Ninevites didn't wait until the 39th day to turn their lives over to God and to change how they were living? They begin immediately to change their ways. They repent on the first day, not the last. Are they not deserving of some praise, the so-called wicked people of Nineveh?

One of the spiritual traps of a passage like this is that if we are not careful, we begin immediately to think of *the other* people in our lives, culture or world who in our opinion need to repent and change their ways, rather than thinking of how OUR lives and ways and behavior need to change. How does repentance look for us?

Like the king in the story we need to come down off our throne of power and control recognizing that before a holy God we're all equally dependent on the Lord for mercy. We all live by the grace of God. From the people of Nineveh we learn that repentance includes prayer, fasting, humbling ourselves, turning from violence, and evil. We may not put on sackcloth and ashes today, but we can humbly pray to God to change our hearts and spirits. With God's help we can love one another with mutual affection and out do one another in showing honor. We can rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer. We can share what we have with others, provide hospitality to strangers, visit the sick, listen to the lonely, and comfort the hurting. We can bless those who curse us, associate with the lowly and seek to live peaceably with all. These are all biblical examples of outward signs of turning around and making the most of the second chance that God gives us.

In Jewish synagogues the entire book of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the Day of Atonement. It is a day for fasting, prayer, repentance, and self-examination (not "other" examination). Jonah is read at dusk when people are tired and hungry, waiting for the climax of their day of worship. Jews repeat the story of Jonah year after year during Yom Kippur services because Judaism rejects fatalism and believes in the possibility of repentance. Decisions do not have to be irrevocable. Violence and evil can be aborted, diverted, even vanquished. A life can be forever altered when a person says, "*Enough – with God's help I must turn around before it is too late.*" Whether the issue is as large as global climate change or as small as each of our individual lives, **one cannot change the past, but God gives us the power and strength to shape the future.**

In the film *Lawrence of Arabia* starring Peter O'Toole, a man named Kasim gets left behind in the Anvil, a brutal stretch of killing desert. Omar Sharif, portraying one of

the Arab chiefs, accepts the news with a shrug. It is Allah's will. One cannot change what is written, it must be the man's fate to die in the desert. Lawrence has a different perspective on life and he endangers their mission to reach the city of Akaba as well as his own life to ride back into the Anvil to try and find Kasim. The Arab chief is dumbfounded that Lawrence, a leader and commander, would do such a thing. Later that night a shout from a sentry on a hillside announces Lawrence is returning. Stunned that he has survived everyone pours out to greet him. Sunburnt, exhausted, parched and needing water, barely able to speak, Lawrence has saved Kasim. Lawrence looks at the shocked chief and says firmly, "*Nothing is written.*"

The lesson in Jonah 3 is that nothing is written, God's mind may change. Punishment may be announced and deserved, but it may be cancelled. Every human being may be granted one more chance, one more opportunity to start his or her life over again. Today all of us are offered a second chance or a third or a fourth by God – some of us may have lost count, but while we still have time it is not too late. Christians are people who have embraced the second chance offered to us through Jesus. Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh. Jesus was a sign to the people of his generation. In Luke 11:29-32, Jesus makes it clear that the city of Nineveh through its repentance and making the most of a second chance is a model to be emulated and followed.

In our time perhaps the primary mission of Jesus' church, the activity to which we should devote our energy and effort once we have embraced God's mercy and turned our lives over to God, **is to share with our generation about God's mercy as Jesus did**. Some people may want signs and wonders and wind and whales; Jesus reminds us all the Ninevites needed was to hear God's word. They turned and were saved and God rejoiced, much as God is pictured as rejoicing in Luke 15 over a found sheep, a found coin, and a found son. Jesus says (Luke 15:7), "*There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.*"

The first three chapters of Jonah represent a feel good story. The ship doesn't sink, Jonah doesn't drown, Nineveh repents and is spared, God is thrilled a city has been transformed and doesn't punish them. And if the wicked folks in Nineveh escape punishment and grow closer to God and to each other – perhaps there is hope for the rest of us. Nobody wants to perish in this story. Not the captain of the ship (1:6) who implores Jonah to call on his God so God will think of them and spare their lives. Not the sailors who ask Jonah what they should do to him so they do not perish. Not the Ninevites who are willing to begin again one day at a time to turn from violence and evil

and to God. The only person in the story who wants to die is Jonah, and God even spares him.

In the Bible, God is rarely shown to be more charitable and merciful than in the book of Jonah. Out of the great fish, Jonah goes to Nineveh, speaks in the name of God and wonder of wonders, people listen and change their ways. God patiently teaches Jonah the value and joy of a second chance to show him that mercy triumphs over judgment.

God has granted us the opportunity for a second chance. Make the most of it – embrace and experience God’s mercy, shown supremely to us in Jesus, make the changes God shows you to make, and tell others the story of the mercy God desires to share with them.

Blessing: “Never despise anybody, never condemn anybody, never speak evil of anyone, and the Lord will give you peace.”

From Sayings of the Desert Fathers.