

Sermon

Jonah Chapter Three

Well, whatever you think of having a hymn that goes to the tune *There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza** at least you cannot fault the words for accuracy in reflecting the biblical text upon which they are based. I'm thinking particularly of the first and last verses of the hymn. Verse one says,

“It was **GOD** who called Jonah to serve as a prophet,
it was **GOD** who called Jonah as prophet, 'twas God.”

Verse nine, the final verse, reads,

“It was **GOD** who called Jonah to serve as a prophet,
it was **GOD** who called Jonah as prophet, 'twas God.”

It is exactly the same in both cases, and that is also how it is in the first verses of the first chapter of *The Book of Jonah*, compared to the opening verses of the third chapter, which we have just had read for us tonight:

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah, son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh; go and denounce it, for I am confronted by its wickedness’.” – Chapter **one**, verses one and two.

And then:

“A second time the word of the LORD came to Jonah: ‘Go the great city of Nineveh; go and denounce it in the words I give you’.” Chapter **three**, verses one and two.

To put it another way, from the beginning of the first chapter of this book to the beginning of the third chapter of this book **nothing has changed**. We begin tonight exactly where we started out two evening services, two sermons and twenty-seven biblical verses ago: **nothing has changed**. Was it worth all the effort? Did I waste all

that time preparing and delivering those challenging addresses? More importantly, perhaps, was your journey to hear the previous sermons really necessary? With Jonah we've travelled from the sea port of Joppa to an unnamed sea shore and **nothing has changed** ...

... as far as God is concerned.

Nothing has changed as far as God is concerned for despite whatever Jonah, a ship's crew, the population of Nineveh or ourselves should decide to do nothing **will** change as far as God is concerned. Through it all; through Jonah's disobedience and flight, through the terror of a mighty storm and the actions of a great fish, nothing changes because **always** God remains the God of second chances, and **nothing** changes that. "A second time" God's word, God's message comes to Jonah, giving him a second chance by commanding him once again to go to the city of Nineveh, to denounce the inhabitants, thus creating a crisis that will give even that fearsome people **their** second chance of forgiveness from the Almighty. Jonah discovers what the Ninevehites will soon discover for themselves and what we ourselves are allowed to discover for us today: God is the God of second chances and nothing, not even death itself changes that reality.

Nor is this discovery unique in the Old Testament. Jonah may have tried to fly as far away from God as possible. He may have been dragged down to the greatest depths

but his is not a unique experience or insight. It is also the witness of the psalmist, speaking with memorable beauty in the 139th psalm:

“Where can I escape from your spirit,
Where flee from your presence?”

If I climb up to heaven you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol [as Jonah almost did], you are there.

If I travel to the limits of the east,
Or dwell in the bounds of the western sea [as Jonah attempted, heading for Tarshish],
Even there your hand will be guiding me, your right hand holding me fast.”

Psalm 139: 7-12

No matter how much Jonah, the Psalmist or we might try to deny God’s call, it does not change. No matter how far away, Jonah, or anyone else might try to run from God’s call, it does not work, because no matter what we do God does not change in determination to give us that second chance.

So, at the beginning of chapter three nothing has changed, yet **everything has changed**. Because God is unchanged in the determination to offer a second chance – “a second time the word of the Lord came to Jonah” – everything has changed **for Jonah**. The Jonah who hears the word the second time is not the Jonah who heard God’s word on the first occasion. Since then he has, as we were reminded in the first sermon in this series, discovered that God’s call can not be evaded or run away from, even if you try to get to Tarshish. He has been exposed as one who rejects God’s call and has been pitched into the raging sea. Experiencing rescue from the storm only by being consigned to the darkness of the belly of the fish, Jonah, as I pointed out in the second sermon, does not try to do deals with God to be delivered from this danger but prays in praise of the God who has preserved his life, admittedly though, through a

unique form of ‘tough love’. So the Jonah who is spewed out of the fish unto the dry land is a changed man; he is a failed prophet, but one who is ready to seize God’s second chance and so find redemption from his many failures. Because, for God, nothing has changed, for Jonah everything has changed.

Then, this changed man, obeying God’s word, shares God’s word with the people of Nineveh. Because Jonah has changed they get their chance to change as well; they get God’s second chance. And they seize it! Jonah preaches the imminent destruction of the city and we are told, “The people of Nineveh took to heart this warning from God; they declared a public fast and high and low alike put on sack cloth.” (3: 5) The response makes its way all the way to the top of this hierarchical society. Even the king covers himself in sack cloth and sits in ashes, commanding, “Let all pray with fervour to God, and let them abandon their wicked ways and the injustice they practice.” (3: 8)

Would that it were always that easy! I have not publicly denounced Brentwood on behalf of the Lord, nor have I ever announced the imminent demise of those wayward communities: Ingatestone and Billericay; at least, not yet. If I did denounce these communities I have little or no confidence that they would respond in the way that the great metropolis of Nineveh responded. I would expect a mixture of amusement, irritation and indifference were I to make the attempt. Maybe that says more about me than the situation. Perhaps I’m a reluctant prophet, attempting to ignore or flee from God’s word and I had better to keep an eye out for any big fish that happen to

be passing by as I make my way home tonight. On the other hand, Nineveh seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps the author of the book has given us an idealistic account of the response or maybe just every so often things work out that way. Whichever is the case, no matter what I might preach in public I'm not expecting sack cloth and ashes to become the 'must-have' fashion look around here any time soon.

None of that means that we need despair just because we happen to live in a time that is cool or sometimes even hostile towards the word that comes from the LORD. What is true of God in the *Book of Jonah* is true of God today: God remains unchanging in the desire to present individuals and peoples - and creation itself, I would also say - with a second chance. People **do** take up the offer to be changed. They do so as individuals and as communities. As a society, currently we appear to be addicted to debt in the pursuit of comfortable lifestyles; we may be too prone to use our armed forces to enforce our will on others; we may be too ready to let others in this world live in poverty whilst we enjoy luxury. As the hymn writer John Bell puts it, in a hymn concerning Jesus' birth:

“Centuries of skill and science,
Span the past from which we move,
Yet experience questions whether
With such progress we improve.”

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But we can in some significant ways change. As a people we have moved on, no longer content to be the owners of slaves, **more** open to peoples who are different from ourselves; more ready to demand goods that are fairly traded rather than

unjustly exploiting others in the world. None of these changes came about at the pace exhibited by the people of Nineveh, but then Jonah took longer to change and perhaps he is the better model for us today.

This story though, provides not just a model for how we might behave but is a sort of picture of how God works. Do you want to run away from God? God will find a way of coming into your life. God – Godself - will come to you, should it be necessary to spend time with you and call on you to turn your life around. You'll find God in human guise, in ways reminiscent of Jonah, asleep in a boat in the midst of a storm that threatens to sink it and kill the crew. You will find God in the world, when death is close, like Jonah, lots being cast by those who have him in their power; and with the understanding that somehow his death will bring a divine response that allows others to live. As Jesus himself said, in Matthew's Gospel, denouncing a whole generation, rather than just the city of Nineveh: "It is a wicked, godless generation that asks for a sign, and the only sign that will be given is the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah was in the sea monster's belly for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be three days and nights in the bowels of the earth." (12: 39, 40)

Now Jonah is no Jesus, but Jonah's story, along with the witness of other OT writers and poets, points us in the direction of God in Jesus, and God's unchanging, unswerving determination to give us all a second chance. In the *Book of Jonah*, we are told, concerning the population of Nineveh, that "When God saw what they did and how they gave up their wicked ways, he relented and did not inflict on them the

punishment he had threatened.” (3: 10) That’s consistent: God in the OT only ever changes his mind to put aside destruction in favour of forgiveness and a second chance. And now in Jesus, the one through whom God has spoken to us in these last days, God takes on more ups and downs than Jonah ever did, knowing pain and suffering and death; emerging from three days of death’s darkness in a tomb, as once in a story Jonah did from a fish. Jonah emerges a changed man and as a result others have the chance to change too. Jesus emerges from his ordeal, having by his death given us the second chance of life and God remains **unchanged**, still offering me and you that second chance. Yes, as the scriptures remind us tonight, with God, nothing has changed; and as a result, for Jonah, for us, for me, for you, for our church(es), for our community, and for this imperfect world ... **everything** has changed.

*** JONAH'S WAIL ***

Jonah 1 tune: There's a hole in my bucket

TWO GROUPS SING ALTERNATE VERSES

1.
It was **GOD** who called Jonah to serve as a prophet,
it was **GOD** who called Jonah as prophet, 'twas God.

2.
*It was **JONAH** who scarpered & fled to the ocean,
it was **JONAH** who scarpered, who went the wrong way*

3.
But 'twas **GOD** who was master of sky and of ocean,
it was **GOD** who controlled whether ships could survive

4.
*But 'twas **JONAH** who got on a ship going westwards
it was **JONAH** who slept thinking all would be well...*

5.

It was **GOD** who then blew up the waves on the ocean
it was **GOD** who then blew up the biggest of storms.

6.

*It was **JONAH** who told how he'd fled from God's calling
it was **JONAH** who said, "Throw me out in the sea!"*

7.

It was **GOD** who still wanted to rescue and use him,
it was **GOD** who had Jonah ate up by a fish.

8.

*It was **JONAH** who travelled inside the great belly,
it was **JONAH** who landed quite safe on the shore.*

[PAUSE....., then EVERYONE TOGETHER.....]

9.

It was **GOD** who called Jonah to serve as a prophet,
it was **GOD** who called Jonah as prophet, 'twas God.

John M Campbell