“In Case You Missed It: Bible Stories for Big People - Jonah” Jonah 3:1-10

Rev. Patricia Weatherwax January 21, 2018

“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.” (Jonah 3:10)

**INTRODUCTION** (to 2018 series and to today’s message)

It really helped, in 2017, to have the Hebrews plan for all the sermons I was assigned, for the year not just the summer concentration. Jeff’s orderliness and planning has certainly rubbed off on me. And back when I was presenting the “Heroes of the Faith” from Hebrews 11, I heard that not everyone knew all those stories. In seminary a peer who came to faith as an adult said she never heard the story of Zacchaeus until she was telling it for Children in Worship. Even so. Who of us took Christian education very seriously as a teen and took the stories to the next level, digging deeper? And how often do we study these “children’s” stories as adults? We need to be able to discern, to mine the theological messages and teachings behind the Bible stories that we learned in Sunday School and as children, if we ever did learn them and remember them!

Creation, Noah, David and Goliath, Jesus calming the storm and walking on the water and feeding 5000 with 5 loaves of bread and 2 littles fishes- we teach those to the littlest children but there are deeper lessons in all those accounts for even the most mature Christ follower. The stories have a lot to teach, that’s why they’re in the Bible, and usually they have many more than one point to make.

So this year, on the Sundays when I have the privilege and the responsibility to bring the word I’m going to try to bring a Bible story you may have learned early on, and specifically stress the deeper theological points in the narrative that need to be emphasized as we mature.

When possible I will use an assigned lectionary text, too. Most stories, like today’s Jonah, are a lectionary text, part of a Christian-church-wide 3 year cycle. We as part of the whole body of Christ, are encouraged to study these! Today specifically is Year B, the third Sunday after Epiphany. So, I won’t pick the story randomly, unless the Spirit is really shouting something to us along the way. Let me know if the Spirit is shouting at you that you need to hear a specific Bible story!

**CONTEXT**

What you need to know about this Jonah story? Did you start the word search on the bulletin? That’s ok, it’s part of the experience. What do children learn from a word search? Words! Most of the lessons to learn about God that are *important* aren’t hiding in there. And some of the answers are there, but what are the questions? Where’s the explanation and the reflection and the application to one’s own life? If you read or listen to the whole book of Jonah being read, it will only take you a few minutes. If you study the themes, it could take your entire lifetime. How’s that for context? Adult spiritual life is not a word search. It’s more than facts and details, cities and timelines. It’s questions.

The story of Jonah is one of the best known of all Bible stories. Probably only a $200 question on *Jeopardy!* The story has important lessons to teach. As Jonah came to understand and accept, God’s love reaches out to people everywhere. After all, God is the one who made us all. And although God cannot let evil continue unchecked forever, because God is just and good, what God wants is ***not*** to punish, but to have people change for the better. God is ready to forgive those who are sorry for wrong they have done and who want to make a new start. God gives fresh starts and second chances. As many as necessary. But Jonah found this hard to take. It was a change in the status quo.

The people of Ninevah, were Assyrians, not part of the Hebrew family of God. Sending Jonah to them was a bold move of inclusion, on God’s part! God of ALL people, Jonah didn’t *wanna* include. He liked excluding and staying away from those ”others” who his people had always excluded. He didn’t wanna invite them to live God’s way and be part of God’s family. “Nope”, he said, I’m going the other way, on this God.”

Now, really. Who is this story about? Since the title is Jonah, you might say that, but more accurately the story is about God. It’s a story about “For God so loved the world.” And it’s written from a very human perspective.

**PREQUEL** (Here’s the backstory- a popular new word for history)

What did you (probably) learn about this story, early on? There are basically two points that children hear with this story. What do the littlest ones know with Jonah? (PHOTO #1 cartoonish)

It’s really all about the big fish (or was it a whale?) and that it’s ok, because God takes care of you even in the mouth of a fish. Kids need to know that? Jonah prayed a beautiful prayer of faith from inside the fish. It’s a happy fish, don’t be afraid! God’s always with you.

With bigger children there are two versions to their lesson. The teacher’s version and the kids’. The story, when kids get to the age of knowing about disobedience, is about listening to and obeying God. (PHOTO #2 -- Jonah Runs Away).

If you hear God telling you to share your faith- do it! “Just Walk Across the Room” or the country, to Ninevah. *Don’t* go in the opposite direction. It doesn’t help you to do the wrong thing, when you know what the right thing is! We can all remember *that’s* an important thing to know and remember. That’s the lesson for kids.

Kids, though, want to talk about how Jonah got *out* of the fish. Anytime a kid can say variations of the word *puked* in Sunday School, it’s a good day. Differing translations: Spewed, spit, vomited, ewh.

Most of the time we don’t hear about Jonah after 5th grade, but sometimes teens get to hear the message of our persistent gracious God:

* Chapter 1 verse 2 God says: “Jonah, go to Ninevah”.
* Ch 2: Jonah goes the opposite direction, ends up overboard and in a big fish.
* (this is what Rev. Banks last week called a “self-made mess”)
* God provided a way out.
* Chapter 3 verse 2, God again says: “Jonah, go to Ninevah”.
* God gives Jonah and Nineveh second chances and forgiveness! Amen

Teens need to learn the gospel of grace, taught to Jonah and Ninevah!

**LESSON**

This is not to say that any of these lessons that we learned as a tot, tween, or teen are wrong or are not an important part of our spiritual foundation, for where we are now. Stories have a lot to teach, and often there’s even more than the points we make for children.

Our spiritual life is cumulative- it grows and builds on previous lessons learned. That which adults can understand need the foundational learning. But as we heard and understood in Hebrews (5:11-14) we have to move from milk to solid foods, someday! Let’s go deeper. But, Wait.

Sometimes going deeper causes more questions about a Bible passage. There needs to be reflection and explanation. Sometimes it feels like we are changing the definitions, or saying things that contradict other things! It does get harder, less clear cut!

The [Westminster Shorter Catechism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_Shorter_Catechism) says that "[God] is a spirit, whose being, wisdom power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth are infinite, eternal, and unchangeable." Those things do not change. A number of Scriptures attest to this idea (such as Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 102:26; Mal. 3:6; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:17–18; Jam. 1:17).

The formal word for unchanging is *immutable*. Immutability is an attribute that God is unchanging in character, will, and covenant promises. God’s mind won’t change.

God's immutability defines all God's other attributes, too: God is immutably wise, merciful, good, and gracious. … Infiniteness and immutability in God are mutually supportive and imply each other. An infinite and changing God is inconceivable; indeed, it is a contradiction in definition. [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immutability_(theology)#cite_note-3)

So what does the story of Jonah teach us about the **Immutability of God**? Remember, I said it was written from a very human point of view. So, now we have a problem. Jonah 3:10:

“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.”

“God changed his mind” ? How does that set next to the concept that God is all-knowing and unchanging, forever?

“Simply put, God genuinely *relates* to people. He may be *immutable*, but he is not *immobile*. He listens to prayer; he sees our actions; he knows our hearts; and he responds.” (Kent Muhling reformed answers)

God is not changing his mind in some whimsical way, God truly relates and responds to people. When *we* change our mind, it’s in response to better information. We hear new facts or learn the truth, when we had been believing something untrue. God already knows all the correct answers. God will never “hear” new information or find out someone had been misleading or deceptive. Since God can’t be wrong. God doesn’t ever need to change his mind. People change and God works with us as we do. It might seem like God is changing but, like in the Jonah story-- God gets what God wants. God got Jonah to Nineveh and got the community of Nineveh to straighten up and fly right.

Part of this conundrum works out as you look at God’s realm. Remember, God exists outside our concept of time, without beginning or middle or end. We can barely picture that. The writer of 2 Peter phrased it this way “do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (2 Peter 3:8). God must chuckle at our schedules and plans, in light of seeing centuries all in focus at once.

God’s mind isn’t changeable like ours, we just don’t know the mind of God, or how it works. We can’t know the mind of God; we can’t predict the future, or even understand why things happen the way they do.

My favorite line from The Shack, book (2007) and movie (2017) comes when a comfortably lounging Papa God says “ You have no idea what I’m doing”. Put that with my favorite verse from Psalm 139:16-- “In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.” Add the verse that convinced me God wanted me to go to seminary “ For I know the plans I have for you says the LORD”. (Jeremiah 29:11) .

Did you hear that? God already knows *your* story. God’s walking it with you, as it is worked out, on earth as it is in heaven. But, we “can not find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

So, then what about prayer? When it seems like God changes the course of human events, like this past week when my fervent prayers for my grandson were answered, it wasn’t that God was changing His mind or suddenly acting differently on Jude’s behalf.

It was, as we read last year in Hebrews 6, that "God desired to show even more clearly... the unchangeable character of his purpose". (Hebrews 6:17). We know God’s eternal attributes: being merciful, loving, just, kind and good, powerful and present and perfect -- those never change; they work for our good. God will always work to bring us toward those things. God will make a way.

We use words like immutable and omniscient to describe God, because we are so far opposite. We change our minds constantly. Colton Dixon recently sang a Christian hit, one we can all understand. Hear those words of our with the One unchanging constant. *Through All of It*

There are days I've taken more than I can give

And there are choices that I made

That I wouldn't make again

I've had my share of laughter

Of tears and troubled times

This is has been the story of my life

I have won

and I have lost

I got it right sometimes

But sometimes I did not

Life's been a journey

I've seen joy, I've seen regret

Oh and You have been my God

Through all of it

You were there when it all came down on me

When I was blinded by my fear

And I struggled to believe

But in those unclear moments

You were the one keeping me strong

This is how my story's always gone

I have won

and I have lost

I got it right sometimes

But sometimes I did not

Life's been a journey

I've seen joy, I've seen regret

Oh and You have been my God

Through all of it CCLI# 637582

Is that what you remember learning from Jonah and the whale? The message was there in every Bible story you heard. Whatever is going on, God has never changed his mind. You are loved.