***A CHANGE OF MIND***

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Texts: Jonah 3:1-10 and Mark 1:14-15

The only constant in our lives these days seems to be change: a new president and new priorities for his administration, a mutation of the coronavirus that makes it spread even faster, climate change that inflicts increasingly severe weather around the globe, virtual worship that allows us to worship safely today, the Cleveland Browns making the NFL playoffs. 55 years ago Bob Dylan sang, *The times they are a-changin’*, and so they were and so they are and so they will. Are you changing with them? In what ways, if any, has your mind changed over the years or in these last months or in these last weeks? I remember meeting with a fellow who was unhappy about some changes in the church a few years ago. “I guess I’m just too old to change,” he said. I remember thinking how sad that was, that we should ever be too old or too closed-minded or too inflexible or too stubborn or too proud to change our minds. As our friend Jim Simpson writes:

*I am glad scientists and doctors are allowed to change their minds…I would not want to have the type of surgery accepted fifty or a hundred years ago. Healthy minds change in the light of experience and deeper insights. Change, not certainty, is the essence of growth. In 1898 Mark Twain wrote in his Notebook: “Education consists mainly in what we have unlearned.” When Penelope Keith was asked whether there was any one character in fiction with whom she identified, she replied: “It changes as you get older. I used to weep for Romeo and Juliet. Now that I am older, I think, ‘Their poor parents.’”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Life changes us. Experiences change us. New ideas and discoveries and insights change us. As our Reformed heritage affirms, we – our hearts, our minds, our lives – are always being re-formed, reshaped, and changed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A change of mind can be a good thing, under the guidance of the Spirit. The book of Jonah would offer a hearty “AMEN!” for in that old, old story there are a host of changes of mind and changes of minds – some voluntary, some necessary, some surprising.

The first to change his mind is Jonah. When God calls him to go to Nineveh, Jonah immediately flees in the opposite direction. He is firmly committed to NOT go to Nineveh; Jonah regards Nineveh, not as *that great city*, as the Lord refers to it, but as THAT GREAT DISASTER, a violent, sinful, pagan place. Nothing good could come from proclaiming a word from the Lord there, or so Jonah thought. Yet his attempt to escape that call and flee from the Lord was a disaster itself: a storm threatening to swamp the ship and drown all on board, Jonah being thrown overboard, three long days in the belly of a fish, and the indignity of being vomited up on land. Only then did Jonah change his mind and realize that he could not run away from the Lord; when God told him again to go to Nineveh, he went – unhappily, reluctantly, angrily, but obediently, he went.

Have you ever tried running from God, trying to escape God’s grasp on your life or God’s call on your talents, daring to think you could refuse whatever task the Lord was calling you to? Sometimes our minds are so fixed on what WE want that we disregard what GOD wants from us and for us. But if it is God’s voice calling you, then do not think you can escape it. Like the call of Samuel that Sarah spoke of last week, God calls again and again and again until we recognize the voice and respond – or in the case of Jonah – do as the Lord asks. Do you really want God to send a storm or a whale to convince you to obey? Or might you change your mind on your own and do as God asks, before disaster strikes!

Jonah’s change of mind did not result in a change of attitude, but it did result in a change of venue. He went to Nineveh and there proclaimed the word the Lord had given him, a word he was hesitant to proclaim but which brought him some satisfaction: *Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* he cried. In other words: Y*ou all gonna die!* Of all the prophesies in Scripture, Jonah’s is the most succinct. No description of what evil they have done. No call to repent and turn from their ways. No proclamation of why God is decreeing their demise. No clarity on which God is issuing the decree. Just a forecast of doom and gloom – *You all gonna die!* – with no suggestion of a way out for the people. What is most remarkable in the story is that the Ninevites took that dire message to heart. “*The people of Nineveh believed God*,” says the text, though one wonders just *what* it is they believed.

They certainly believed the Lord would do what Jonah said the Lord would do. They believed they were about to be destroyed. But apparently they also held a glimmer of hope that the Lord might relent and spare them. “*Who knows?*” muses the king. “*God may relent and change his mind; God may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish*.” Where did that belief come from? It certainly did not come from Jonah, who was more than happy to see them all die and was gravely disappointed when they did not. It did not come from any righteous person within the city, for none is identified – not one! Perhaps it came from the same place as that of the sailor who in the midst of the storm pleaded with Jonah to call on his God, saying: “*Perhaps your god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish*.” Who knows? Perhaps? These are hardly the testimonies of suddenly faithful men. They are, however, the hope-filled pleas of those about to perish who are willing to grasp at any straw in the hopes of being saved.

The king in Nineveh did more than offer a plea. He took action. He decreed that all people and animals observe a fast - refusing food or water, that they cover themselves in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance and turn from their violent, evil ways. The king, led the way by stepping down from his throne, removing his robe, and dressing in sackcloth and ashes as he asked his people to do. What a contrast to Pharaoh who sneered at Moses when Moses warned of the plagues to come! What a contrast with the Philistines who sent Goliath to be their champion while mocking the God of Israel! The king of Nineveh had, to our knowledge, never experienced the mighty wrath of the Lord, yet he feared it and believed and so led his people on a penitent path. Centuries later Jesus would cry out in Galilee: *Repent and believe the good news*! For the Ninevites there was no good news assured by their repentance, yet they repented anyway – with desperate hope in the mercy of a god they did not know.

That change of heart and mind did not go unnoticed by the Lord. God heard their cries, saw their repentance, and most significantly, *saw how they turned from their evil ways*, and the Lord spared them. *God changed his mind about the calamity God had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.* That is the testimony of the text – God changed God’s mind, literally *was sorry* for the calamity about to come and so let the people live. It is not the only time that God has such a change of heart and mind. Abraham lobbies God to spare the people of Sodom when God is determined to destroy them until God agrees that if there are just ten righteous men in the city it will be spared. Moses implores God not to destroy Israel for building the golden calf, arguing that it would look really bad for the Lord to bring the people out of bondage only to kill them all in the wilderness, and God relents. In the Noah story, God hangs a rainbow in the sky as a reminder not to destroy the earth by flood again – as if God needed that reminder to check God’s worst impulses. The divine mind is perhaps not as resolutely fixed upon a course of action as we sometimes think, for again and again, God changes God’s mind and does not do the violent thing God intended to do.

Is that how you think of God, as one who might have a change of mind and heart – O you who began this day by singing, *Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise*? Is God apt to change in thought and action or is God immutable, unchanging, and fixed in all that God plans to do? Presbyterians believe in predestination, but often predestination is confused with predetermination. Predestination is the belief that God has a plan for all of creation and all of us, and that in the end God knows where it will all end. Predetermination suggests that every step along the way is planned out by God; we are just puppets on a stage acting out the script God has already written for us. But then free will is not free will, and as the story of the Fall in the Garden of Eden makes clear, we all have free will to make mistakes, to sin, to reject God and then to repent and turn back to God. Why would God ask us to repent if we had no choice in the matter? We reject predetermination because Scripture rejects it. The God who is pleasantly surprised by the Ninevites change of heart and mind and penitent practices, happily has a change of mind as well and spares the people who, like Jonah, are created in God’s image.

We should not be surprised that God would have such a change of heart and mind from time to time, for we who are created in God’s image have more than our fair share of those changes – sometimes for the better, often for the worse. Yet God does not give up on us, does not write us off, does not forsake us, does not abandon us, but calls us to repent and believe the good news that Jesus proclaimed: The Kingdom of God has come near! We are invited to share in that Kingdom, to live under the reign of a God who loves us without end and longs for us to repent and love God as well. For, if God could love Jonah, surly and rebellious as he was; if God could love the Ninevites, violent and evil as they were before their repentance; if God could love the world as God did in sending Jesus to us while we were yet sinners; then God can love us too – each and every one of us. While a lot of things are changing these days, one thing does not change: God’s love for us. That my friends, is good news – for the Ninevites, for Jonah, for the world, and for us – good news indeed! Amen

1. James A. Simpson, “Christ-Like Compassion” in *Life and Work*, October 2011, p.47 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)