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Jonah 3:1-5,10
Changing God's Mind
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Jonah had some very clear convictions. One of them was that the world was divided between the righteous and the unrighteous. His people, Israel, were righteous because they lived by God's holy law. Their enemies were unrighteous, and thus would be judged by God. But recently, after spending three days in the belly of a large fish, Jonah had developed some new convictions. One of them was that God is hard to understand. Another was that God has a strange way of getting you to the unrighteous places you don't want to go.

We all have some pretty core convictions about life. Your core conviction can be that if you work hard, you will succeed. Or it can be that if you are careful, watch your diet and exercise, you will stay healthy. Or maybe it is that if you obey the rules in life, God and his holy angels will watch over you. These convictions serve as cornerstones, and we build our lives upon them. Notice that most of our core convictions are conditional, claiming that "if" we do what we are supposed to do, then we will be okay. But what if God honored your careful living by sending you to a place you did not want to go?

When Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, he tried to sail to Tarshish initially. Tarshish was a dream, a fantasy. It was a place of gold, silver, and sheer beauty. We have no idea where it actually existed, if it ever existed at all. But that doesn't matter. Tarshish always works best as a dream. It is where we expect all of our hard work to take us. Nineveh by contrast was a very real city. We know it was the capital of Assyria, Israel's great enemy. The text numbers its inhabitants and measures its size for us just to make it all the more real. Nineveh is no dream. It is the very real place where you find yourself in life. It is not the place where you want to be, but the place where life flings you in spite of all your careful living.

Nineveh can be your difficult job where you wade through stress day after day. Or it can be a hospital room or an unemployment office. It can be the empty apartment you come to at the end of the day, or the home that is being torn apart by anger and hurt. It is never the place you had dreamed of finding in life. Like Jonah, you can point to the most extraordinary reasons for why you ended up in Nineveh, or it may be that a lot of very ordinary decisions landed you there.

The problem with finding yourself in Nineveh is not simply that you don't want to be there. The real problem is theological. You ask, "Why did God bring me to this place?" So being in Nineveh challenges your core conviction. After all your careful living, how did this happen to you?

You are not in the hard place of life because you are being punished. You are there because God has a mission for you. When the fourth century bishop Basil of Caesarea ordained his younger brother Gregory, he sent him to the city of Nyssa. This was not Tarshish. Nyssa was an

unremarkable city that had little to commend it. Nobody built a good ecclesiastical career in Nyssa. When Gregory complained, his brother said, "I am not sending you to Nyssa to confer distinction upon you. I am sending you there for you to confer distinction upon the city." If you find yourself in a place you do not want to be, the real question is not what did you do to deserve this, but how do you confer distinction upon this hard place? How do you make it a holy place?

Of course, Nineveh was already a holy place because it belonged to God, as all places do. But the Ninevites did not see that and had been making a lot of really bad choices. In fact, we are told that it was an evil place. Rather than judging them for their evil, however, the Lord wanted to redeem the city. So he sent Jonah into the midst of the city to do a little preaching about the need to repent, to turn, stop moving away from God, and turn back to him.

This doesn't mean that God is asking you to turn your desk at work into a pulpit. But it does mean that God sent you there to be a ray of light in the darkness. And it may just be that someone will turn back to God because of the light they see in you.

In the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins,
Christ is at play in ten thousand places
Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

"Christ is at play" is a fascinating line. Perhaps the poet meant that Christ is *in* play, as if to say at work in people's lives. Or maybe he meant that Christ's play is an unfolding drama in lives that are not finished. Then again it is possible he meant simply that Christ is at play, and in Christ we are made playful again. In Christ we realize that life is not an achievement, not a condition to be met, but a gift to be received with all the delight that a child has with each new day. That would make all places, even Nineveh, doxological playground.

Can you imagine how distinctive you would be in Nineveh if you were just joyful? What if Christians had the reputation not for pushing political agendas but for just being winsome? That would create a pretty attractive ray of light in our darkness.

Jonah was not exactly a model of witnessing through joy and playfulness in Nineveh. He warned the people with his bad dog sermons that they were in a heap of trouble and they had better turn or burn. It didn't take a lot of convincing. Most people know when they are in trouble with God. So to Jonah's dismay, the Ninevites all repented and turned back to God. And God was so delighted about their return home that, as the text says, "God changed his mind about the calamity he said he would bring upon them."

God changed his mind? That has frightening implications if we take it out of context. So my advice is don't take it out of context. Here it simply means that God can be moved. As the Ninevites turned to God, God turned to them. Even God can be playful, doxological, reveling in the joy of the return of the prodigals.

Jonah would have none of this playfulness. The fourth chapter of the story depicts his anger as he cries out to God. "This is why I fled to Tarshish. This is exactly what I was worried about! I

knew you were a God of mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. If this is the way you are going to treat me, just kill me and get it over with.”

Jonah’s core conviction has just been destroyed. He was certain that the world was divided between holy and profane places, and that the profane places would be judged. Staying holy was a lot of hard work but at least you were supposed to get to watch God clobber the sinners. That is why he didn’t want to see Nineveh repent. He wanted God to destroy it, just as we do. But God has his own core convictions, and among them is an eagerness to forgive.

At the end of the story, God asks Jonah is it really right for him to be angry? “Should I not be concerned for the people of Nineveh?” the Lord asks. It was as if to say, “They are not your religion and not your nationality but they are my people as well. Should I not be concerned?” The word translated as concern in the Hebrew is “hus.” When it is placed next to the word “eye,” it means welling up with tears. So in essence God is asking Jonah, “Should I not cry over those who are lost, and should I not cry with delight over their return?” That is what God is worried about.

There is one other thing that worries God. He worries about all of your carefulness, your certainty that you are right, and your pride in following the rules. He worries it is starving the playfulness out of you. Amen.