

SERMON
JONAH 3:1-5, 10
“WHAT GOD DOES: CHANGING”

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH – WINSTON-SALEM, NC

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Would you pray with me?

God, we enter now into a sacred time of hearing from your word. Open our hearts and minds and allow us all to let the words of Scripture settle within us, and stir us to follow hard after you in all we do. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Intro:

A few weeks ago, Pastor Emily sat with us during a staff meeting and explained she was going to be out today to celebrate the retirement of her former pastor and mentor up in Louisville. When she asked if I would preach today, I said "sure!" And then she smiled and said "soooo, the lectionary passage is from Jonah." I gave her the side eye because we know the story of Jonah well and there are times it almost seems impossible to make sense out of the book of Jonah. I suppose I was already channeling the attitude of Jonah as I thought to myself "there ain't no way I am going to preach on Jonah! There are way cooler passages about Jesus and stuff that I could preach all day long!" So I was polite and said "let me pray about that and see how the spirit leads." As we stood in the back of the sanctuary during the Advent season getting ready to process in, I leaned over to her right before we walked down the aisle and said "okay, I'll preach Jonah." She gave me a surprised and excited look and said "what?! awesome!" And the next week you saw our

sermon series printed and then I wrestled with this passage for a bit. And now here we are.

Here we are reading the story of a prophet, reluctant to do what God was asking him to do, proclaiming a less than glamorous message to the people of Ninevah, and then becoming quite angry and frustrated that God chose to save the people of Ninevah, instead of destroying them as God said would happen. Many people wonder and are curious as to whether God changes God's mind, whether God changes the heart of Jonah because the book of Jonah leaves us hanging with that, and then many wonder how in the world the people of Ninevah were changed when the message they heard from Jonah never even mentioned God. Perhaps this explains the side eye I gave Emily the day she asked. What do we do with this passage?!

In our specific passage today, we are reminded that God **will change people, no matter how good or how bad people are AND no matter how good or how bad the messenger of the News may be.**

I think what we most know about Jonah is the image of Jonah disobeying God's request for him to go to Ninevah and tries to run away. We know that as he is running from God's request by way of Joppa in route to Tarshish, he is quickly swallowed up by a large fish after being thrown overboard by fishermen on a boat. After the fishermen threw

him overboard, the raging waters calmed and the fishermen were in awe of God even more. For the fishermen, Jonah was not a fun boat guest and was really bad at communication it seems, and yet, God changed the fishermen no matter how bad Jonah was.

When we fast forward to our passage, we realize Jonah is given a second chance, by God, to go to Ninevah and proclaim the words God would provide to him. I don't know about you, but I am so thankful that the God of Jonah is the same God we worship today - and that is a God of second chances. In verse 3 of this passage, for anyone reading this for the first time, we get excited because it says that Jonah set out and went to Ninevah, just as God asked him to do. This is good news. We don't want this guy getting swallowed up by a fish again. This is kind of like we see someone who failed at something miserably the first time, but gets back up and tries again. We tend to have a little more compassion for people who are willing to get back up and try again. So here is Jonah - setting out. As the reader we get excited, sitting on the edge of our seats like "okay, what is God going to tell Jonah to say to the folks in Ninevah?" Surely it will say something like "God loves you and you should worship God." Or "God is good all the time and all the time - God is good!" So we keep reading. Jonah starts walking into the city and his moment to proclaim a word from God arrives. He opens his mouth and we hear "Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" Well alrighty then - what an

inspiring 8-word sermon from one of the grumpiest prophets in scripture. Jonah is already not a fan of Ninevah, so it's not surprising that he is actually okay if Ninevah is overthrown by God. I mean, after all, Ninevah is clearly not doing what is pleasing to God and God has every right to do what God wants to do. And what is so interesting and amazing to me is that God is never even mentioned in the message the Ninevites heard from Jonah. **And yet, we know that God *will* change people no matter how good or how bad people are and no matter how good or how bad the messenger may be.**

When I was born, my family lived in a small little town called Hazelwood. It was a place filled with lots of great people, and lots of people who were not so great. Soon after I was born, I had a baby dedication at my home church. They gave me a bible (this bible actually) and I was only 10 months old. Not old enough to read, but on the front of this bible it has my full name. I'm sure the day of the dedication there were wonderful words spoken, but I had no idea what was happening. But they still gave me the Word of God, knowing I had no understanding of the words inside. It wasn't until years later that I came to understand that while my name was on the front of this, the message inside had everything to do with the creating God who knows me by name. They handed this to me, but I look back and realize that **God does change people no matter how good or bad we are or the people who give us the message.**

Several years later, after receiving this bible, I told my church family I wanted to be baptized. Soon after, a sweet senior adult woman from the church came to our house and handed me this - a small New Testament bible - on March 31, 1992. I don't remember much of what she said, but I remember her presence and how she left the Word of God with me that day. As I became fascinated with the words on these pages, I was also becoming acutely aware of my surroundings. As a child, one sees the world in a very pure and innocent way. I am so incredibly thankful for my parents who continually put me in social situations to learn how to see the good and to see reality and how God was at work in this world. But I remember a day when I was still a small child and seeing a not so great situation that served as a messenger in my life. As I visited my grandmother, her house felt safe, but the surrounding neighborhood was beginning to be filled with so much drug use and things that most certainly were not pleasing to God. As I sat in the safety of her home, I remember looking out the window and watching a man abuse his wife. As my grandmother pulled me away from the window, I remember vividly thinking that the God I had read about so much was not turning away from the window, but rather was right there in the midst with that woman. Not only was I changed in how I viewed God, but I wondered who the messenger was going to be for that woman and that man. God does change people no matter how good or bad they are and has appointed a messenger to bring a word from God, no matter how good or bad the messenger may be.

The beautiful example of a loving church sharing the Word of God with me and the harsh reality of watching abuse - both brought me closer to the heart of God in very different ways. I began to wonder if God would ever ask me to be a messenger to those hard places, but that seemed too scary and I didn't want to do that. Sometimes we are like Ninevah, and sometimes we are like Jonah. But no matter what our role is - the messenger or receiver- , **God is relentless in pursuing us and it is the power of God that *will* change people no matter how good or bad they are.**

One of the most hope-filled verses in our scripture today is vs. 3. I've already mentioned that this is the place in the story where Jonah obeyed God and went to Ninevah. But it says that Ninevah was a very important city. Some translations actually say this was a "city great to God." It translates that this was a city already ordained by God and God had divine power over it. As I read the words in scripture, I find that all people are great to God and God's desire for all people, no matter how good or how bad, is that they will live a God-filled life of hope and promise, seeking to worship God alone and trusting and obeying God's words. Ninevah was no ordinary city and Jonah was no ordinary prophet. God chose to use an unlikely messenger to proclaim a message to a corrupt city that was great in God's eyes. God wanted to change the people, but it meant acts of trusting and obeying on the part of all people - messenger and receiver.

When I was 22 years old, there were lots of situations that had formed me to be the person I was then. I give thanks for all the good and for all the challenging moments,

because it led me to a place where God was relentless with me. I heard clearly a call to go - and I ended up in Liberia, West Africa. As I went, I had no idea what would happen. With me, I took this small bible. It looked so clean and cool on the bookshelf at the Bible book store. It was small so I could carry it with me wherever I went. As I look at it now, weathered from the harsh conditions, the high humidity, the many rides on a dirt bike to remote villages, sitting by my mat on the floor in the small village huts where I slept, and being used to read the scriptures to people who had never heard them, I am reminded of the lesson we find in today's passage in Jonah. As soon as a message from God is delivered, the messenger can simply get out of the way (or in Jonah's case, he was happy to disappear quickly!) and the power of the word of God remains. We read this in Isaiah - "The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of our God stands forever." We know that God is relentless in pursuing us, but perhaps God is waiting on our obedience to share the message or our obedience to receive it - and it's then that we know that **God changes people no matter how good or how bad**. I think sometimes we think we need to be bible scholars, or "professional clergy," or have the best charismatic personality to share the message of God, but God simply asks you and me to be obedient - and let God handle the rest. There is a definition of evangelism out there that says evangelism is two very nervous people talking to each other. I think people get nervous to share a message from God because we feel like we have to have all the answers or know exactly what to do. It's not up to us to decide how God wants to use God's message. When God calls us

to be the hands and feet of Jesus to the hungry, the poor, the orphaned, and the widowed, it is not up to us to have the power to change people. If God intends salvation for all people, then we must at least talk to our enemies and the people who are hard for us to connect with. Power belongs to God alone and we are simply agents God chooses to use.

Even while I lived overseas, I wondered what kind of “real job” I would actually have - one where I worked 9-5, earned a great salary, moved into the nicest neighborhood, had 2.5 kids, an awesome husband, and of course the white picket fence. That was what our society was telling us is the key to a happy life. I continued to work in ministry for several years, serving various churches in different roles, went to seminary, and I *knew* without a doubt what God was calling me to do. So several months following graduation from seminary, I pulled a Jonah - and I pulled out of ministry. Thankfully no big fish came and swallowed me up, but God was relentless in pursuing me...pursuing me for a very specific purpose. To be a messenger of the good news of Jesus Christ through my words, my actions, and my relationships. And how this all worked out is that I showed up here at First on Fifth and it was you who called me out to be one of your pastors (put robe on) and ordained me to be a messenger. You placed a stole around my neck to symbolize the calling of God in my life to serve you, and you signed your names in this Bible. And yet again I read the scriptures that say “For God alone my soul waits in silence — He alone is my rock and my salvation — trust in him at all times — power belongs to God.” You, First on Fifth, served as a messenger to me and

gave me the tools to be reminded that it is God who changes people - no matter how good or how bad I am, or you are, or anyone else. This is my calling. Each person in this room is being called by God - to do something that brings God glory and honor. There have been situations even here among our church family where I have heard you say that you aren't sure you are the best person to do _____ (fill in the blank). Teaching Sunday school, serving on a committee, writing, giving, etc. I've heard you say there are people more equipped and better to do a certain task. I've heard you say there are people with better leadership or administrative skills to do the work of the church. And yet, God doesn't want the other people - God wants YOU. God wants to use YOU to change you and to change others. Sometimes you may not be super thrilled about what God is asking you to do, and sometimes it is simply fear that is stopping you. Allow God to use you to help change others and in the process, change yourself. As it turns out, faithfulness to God is not about how you feel, it's about what you do.

We know from our passage today that God did not overthrow Ninevah. God is a God of mercy and grace and compassion and rejoiced in Ninevah's obedience to believe in God and to turn from their evil ways. It is God who worked in their hearts, even though Jonah's message never even mentioned God! But it was up to the people to respond and receive that mercy from God. God will change and use people no matter how good or bad they are - we simply have to trust God and respond with an obedient "yes" - trusting the power of God to change people.

Amen.

This morning we want to give you a chance to respond if the Spirit is speaking to you.

There may be some of you that have never made that decision to be a follower of Jesus and you'd like to do and be part of the Church. Some of you may feel called to serve God in a new way. Whatever is on your heart and mind, we invite you to respond as we stand and sing "Trust and Obey."