

January 24, 2021

Responding...Change

Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 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.

Sermon:

Things tend to work—well, until they don’t anymore. At least, we find things that we think work for us, such as beliefs, perspectives, habits, coping mechanisms—we use them, we hold them and we rely on them both in the ways they serve us beautifully and in the ways we know they are no longer serving us at all. We cling to them until sometimes we are forced to let them go.

It was on the road to Jericho that things changed. They changed in ancient times for a man who was traveling that road; you remember, don’t you? It was that man who was robbed and beaten. It changed for two others who passed him by without doing a thing and especially for that third man—a Samaritan—who did not pass him by. It was the *Good Samaritan*—the one who stopped.

It was on that same road in our times that things changed for a certain woman—a pastor, a strong beacon of faith—Nadia Bolz Weber, who shared on the Moth Story hour how everything changed for her on that road in the most unexpected ways. Nadia confessed that she has always prided herself on self-sufficiency—on taking care of everyone else, which also included herself—thank you very much. She was on a trip with fellow Lutheran clergy, nice and wonderful people (that is my background, after all) to the Holy Lands. The truth is—she was good at taking care of herself so she didn’t hang out with them very much; she didn’t talk to them very much, but she had a secret too. She was terrified of riding in any vehicle that wasn’t in her control on mountainous twisty roads. In case you don’t know—that is exactly the way the road from Jericho to Jerusalem is.

That is why in that ancient story, robbers lay in wait for passersby, because there are so many hairpin twists and turns that you cannot see what is around the next corner, and it is the reason why Nadia was petrified of the ride. Unlike the ancient traveler, she actually made it down okay. She said she was gripping the seat, gripping her faith, and silently praying over and over, while refusing to look at the window—until they got safely down. But at the end of the day, when they went back up, she tried to do those same things again but then suddenly the trip was interrupted by the sound of a groan—a scraping sound and finally by the bus beginning to go backwards. It was not a good thing; you see, the bus had missed one of the hairpin turns and was now sliding precariously to the edge of the road. In the midst of her prayers, suddenly the bus driver yelled out, “Leave your belongings and get out—quickly!!” Although she managed to get out, she’s not sure if she ran over anybody on the way out, but once safely out, then everything broke down.

Nadia tells the story of how she found herself in the middle of the road, hugging her legs, unable to breathe, in the middle of a panic attack, brutally aware of just how much things no longer worked and how desperately change was needed. And I've got to tell you that on that road change happened. It came to her in the most loving way.

I wonder when Jonah realized that things needed to change? I wonder if it was that time when God called him to go to Nineveh—the seat of the evil empire—and speak on God's behalf, letting them know that they needed to change or they would be destroyed. You see, Jonah ran away—not because he was afraid that he wasn't up to the task but rather because he knew just what God might do. This prophet knew God in the depths of his heart, and he knew that God was a God of forgiveness and reconciliation—a God of second chances, ironically Jonah himself is getting one here, right? Jonah had built his whole worldview—his coping mechanism on the hope that those Ninevites, who had persecuted Israel for so long, were at last going to get what was coming to them. Now that God was calling them to repent, Jonah knew what would happen if they did—that in fact God was going to forgive them. And that would bring his coping mechanism of revenge to an end. Even if Jonah already knew that to hope for such a thing was a dead end in itself.

If not at that moment—I wonder if it was on the boat when the seas got rough? But the Bible tells us it was neither of those things. It was in the belly of the whale when all seemed lost. In Jonah Chapter 2, it says that when Jonah prayed, he said, “I will do what you ask; I will proclaim your salvation.” That is a stunning prayer. It's a great prayer for all of us in the midst of these times, and especially those of us who may get lost from time to time, holding on to our own convictions and righteousness, instead of yielding to God's. If you ever need such a prayer, check out Jonah, Chapter Two. We know though that things did change for Jonah because the second time he was called, he answered. When God said, ‘Go,’ he went; when God said, ‘Speak,’ he did. It was a monumental change for Jonah, but not nearly as the one it brought about—for when Jonah completed that journey of three days walking across Nineveh, shouting ‘Repent,’ everyone responded. The Book of Jonah says that everyone from the king to the servant, from the old to the young and from the poor to the rich—from the human even to the animals—everything and everyone simply sat down in repentance—until the change they needed could come to them in a loving way.

I loved David's interpretation of the way Jonah spoke (while offering today's reading). There are prophets among us these days, after all. But the truth is that it didn't matter so much how Jonah spoke but why. It didn't matter who the prophet was for the Ninevites because they had probably never heard of this guy named Jonah. But whatever pitch, whatever tone, whatever attitude was present in his voice, they heard not just the voice of God—for that is what a prophet speaks—but in those words they heard the very salvation of God. And suddenly they knew that despite their power and success, despite their road, their perspectives or their outlook—it led nowhere good. So I picture the Ninevites, much like Nadia Bolz Weber, gathering their legs into their bodies and waiting until help could come to them.

Author Tim Sorensen in his great little book, *Everywhere You Look*, reminds us of the truth that came to Jonah, hoping that we can hear it in the peace and comfort of this sanctuary or in your home, rather than waiting until drastic measures like winding up in the belly of a whale will

finally get us to pay attention. The truth is that our job, our calling, our vocation is first to listen and watch for what the Spirit is saying and doing—so that we might then do what Jonah did, which was to align ourselves with what God is already doing and with the salvation that God is already offering, even and especially in those places where our own coping mechanisms, our human desires for protection of our own and punishment for our enemies—gives way to God’s better desires for redemption. So this coming to church is indeed for our enrichment and our togetherness as a school—but just as much (and maybe even more) for how we can then turn out and *be* church for the world.

After all, in this season of Epiphany, we remember that that is exactly why Jesus was sent to us in the first place. Oh yes, don’t forget—that we remember Jesus’ commandment was to love our neighbors—to love our friends—and then explicitly to love our enemies too, so that God’s salvation might sprout forth in our midst and even amazingly—through what we say and through what we do. It is to remember what church is for; for we gather not and ever as a dead end—for that is not God’s plan for us or for anyone. “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly,” Jesus taught. That can only happen when we hold loosely enough to the beliefs, perspectives, habits and coping mechanisms that we have developed in order to allow better ones to come and to allow changes to abound.

Oh my goodness, friends! In 2020, we have been holding on, haven’t we? Since March of last year, we have been holding on, amidst this pandemic, and for much longer than the last four years, we’ve been holding on amidst a vision of discord that runs deep in our nation. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can be honest with ourselves that neither of the roads we have taken have led to the kind of goodness, justice and mercy that God calls for and that God offered the Ninevites. Through vaccines and treatment, through protocol and protective gear, there is hope in the pandemic; it is good, amen! I’ll tell you this, though—there is much more hope through God’s salvation—through God’s saving idea that we are called to care for one another and to look out for one another, even as Jesus showed us—sacrifice for one another. There is much more hope for the pandemic and more if we commit ourselves to align with what God is already doing and if we undertake all of our habits, not just for ourselves or for those whom we love—but for the sake of the whole and even those who we might mistakenly see as enemy or like Jonah, even sinfully imagine that they might get what they deserve. There is hope for the healing of our nation’s rift too; there is hope for the diverse leadership being created to lead and through the glimmer of more folks being willing to talk to other leaders who have different ideas than they do—through a changing spirit that seems to be evolving. It is good, amen! But I will also tell you that there is much more hope through God’s salvation—the kind of salvation that reminds us to stop building barriers and creating other people and other categories; you know—the *‘thems.’* That reminds us that our neighbors are anyone in need. That reminds us that we are to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. That reminds us, by the way, at the end of Jonah, that God loves and cares for everyone—whether we can see the wisdom in that or not.

There is more hope in recognizing that whichever side you find yourself on, that we are called to serve. That whoever holds power the real goal never can be to wield it to the cost of your enemy but rather only towards reconciliation and building for a better future. Because if we do, then it’s not just us who change, though that is good, but much bigger things can change, even as the Book of Jonah proclaims—God herself. Did you notice the last verse? Because when we are in

relationship—when we love and allow ourselves to be loved, then change happens, for that is the nature of life and love—and if you noticed, God loves us enough that as the Book of Jonah proclaimed—God changed God’s mind. It is what happens when we choose to follow Christ and set out on the road—whether a beautiful winding road in the Berkshires—or that perilous twisty, nearly vertical one going to Jericho. By the way, for Nadia Bolz Weber, before that moment when things changed, she would admit that she kept to herself and didn’t feel like she needed someone until finally she did. She thought it was easier to remain on her own because there was less risk; it was easier to talk to strangers, because after all, strangers eventually went away, rather than forming relationships that may linger—because of course relationships can change you. But there in the middle of the road, change came to her in the form of someone who simply walked up to her and draped her loving arms around Nadia and just kept whispering that it was going to be okay, until she could breathe again. She kept whispering that it was going to be okay until she stopped rocking again and that it was going to be okay until Nadia could actually get to her feet again. It would be amplified when Nadia refused under any circumstance to get on that bus and a random stranger passed by in his car and said, “Fine, I will take you to the top of this road.”

Like the Ninevites before her, she stopped and waited until the change came to her, and it would come to her again the next morning at the breakfast table where once again she had staked out her place in the corner at her own table, and while one clergy and his spouse came up and simply sat with her. Nadia began talking with others for the first time on that trip, and she asked about their grandkids and their story so that it could be part of her story—so that they could be together even if—and maybe because—she recognized that change happens.

This morning, friends, whether you’re relating to Nadia’s story or to Jonah’s story, to the Ninevites’ story or even to God’s story of change, there is one truth—change abounds. The question is: will we open ourselves, not to go our own way, but instead to listen to the Spirit—that we might go the way that God is already going, because here is the truth of this: on our own we will always fall short but in God there is mercy, and when we go God’s way, there is a wideness in God’s mercy that is wider even than that sea that Jonah fell into, got swallowed up by the whale and then got spit back out again. There is a wideness in God’s mercy; that is the Good News for today.

Amen.

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