

“WHEN GOD’S MIND IS CHANGED”
JONAH 3: 1-5, 10

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University Church of Chicago
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“The problem with God—or at any rate, one of the top five most annoying things about God,’ writes Anne Lamott in her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, “is that He or She rarely answers [prayers] right away. It can take days, weeks. Some people seem to understand this—that life and change take time. Chou En-lai, when asked, ‘What do you think of the French Revolution?’ paused for a moment—smoking incessantly—then replied, ‘Too soon to tell.’ I, on the other hand, am an instant-message type.”

Ms. Lamott was praying on her forty-ninth birthday, and she was getting no answers. She tried lying on the floor, closing her eyes, refusing to watch CNN. Nothing worked. She called a priest-friend who advised her to “take care of the suffering.” “I can’t get to Iraq,” she replied. “There are folks who are miserable here,” he said.

So she went to the grocery store where she lightened up by flirting with everyone in the store, especially the old people. When the checker finished ringing up her items, she looked at Anne’s receipt and cried, “Hey! You’ve won a ham!”

“I felt blindsided by the news. I had asked for help, not a ham. This was very disturbing. What on earth was I going to do with ten pounds of salty pink eraser? I rarely eat ham. It makes you bloat.”

After much delay, sending a checker to the back of the store, trying to get the manager to give the ham to the next family who paid with food stamps and more waiting, the ham appeared. “The bag boy handed me a parcel the size of a cat.”

Just as she thought about tossing the ham out of the window of her car, she encountered a slow-moving car in the parking lot. The car was a rusty wreck with an old friend at the wheel. It was a woman with whom Anne had got sober a long time ago, and each of them had a son at the same time. “She has dark black skin and processed hair the color of cool tar.”

When Anne announced that it was her birthday, the other woman started crying. She pointed to her gas gauge. “I don’t have money for gas, or food. I’ve never asked for help from a friend since I got sober, but I’m asking you to help me.”

After assuring her friend that she was giving her money as a birthday present to herself and was not giving her a handout, Anne reached into her shopping cart and held out the ham to her “like a clown offering flowers.” “Hey! Do you and your kids like ham?”

“We love it,” she said. “We love it for every meal.”

She put the ham in the seat beside her, firmly, lovingly, as if she were about to strap it in. And she cried some more.

Instead of letting Ms. Lamott retreat deeper and deeper into herself in her moment of agony, God answered her prayer for help in an unexpected way. The universe with an ego at its center, you see, is a very small world.

Today's First Lesson tells the story of a prayer answered in a truly unexpected way. It's a somewhat routine story on its face. Jonah's initially resists God's call to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, then decides to go, gets into all kinds of trouble on the stormy sea, then perfunctorily completes his mission by announcing to the Ninevites that in forty days the city will be overthrown.

Jonah is a distinctive prophetic book because it is primarily about a prophet's adventures rather than a collection of prophetic utterances. The story portrays the human response to the call of God rather than focusing on the causes for the call. Like Jeremiah and Moses, Jonah initially tries to deflect God's call to deliver the prophetic message.

So, he goes to Nineveh and delivers the uncompromising oracle of impending destruction to the Gentile Ninevites: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

And, guess what! The Ninevites were not only impressed. They listened. They not only listened. They repented. "The people of Nineveh believed God, they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on the sackcloth..."

Jonah's story features a number of reversals and contrasts between human actions and the divine will: After trying to save his own life by fleeing to Tarshish, Jonah volunteers to be tossed into the stormy sea in order to save the lives of the Gentile crew. He prefers the seeming certainty of his own death (and thus avoiding the completion of his mission to Nineveh) to the probable destruction of the entire ship.

But what strikes me most vividly about the story is that when Jonah gets to Nineveh and does what God had ordered him to do—tell the people that they had better repent or they will be destroyed, God's will persists and Jonah's lethargic preaching engenders a massive conversion.

And—get this—the text says, "God **changed his mind** about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them." Reversing the expectation of divine judgment, the story depicts the graciousness of God in contrast to the vindictive attitude of the prophet.

Did you get that? **God's mind was changed.** A lot of debate is going on in liberal circles these days about the femininity of God vs. the traditional masculine pronouns we have used to depict the Divine One. Well, perhaps this story can give us some clues: which gender, male or female, do you suppose is more apt to change its mind? Well, in trying to answer that rhetorical question, I heed the words of my mother who used to say, "Don't go there."

But pay attention to the fact that God is not depicted in this story—or in most any other in the entire Bible—as being passive or detached or unconcerned. We do not worship a God who is “out there” or “up there” or in some remote corner of heaven sitting on a throne. Our God is active, involved with us, trying to work out the divine will so that we may enjoy all the blessings and hopes and dreams God has in store for us.

I struggle every day with God’s will. How do know it. How to know that what I do know is truly God’s will and not some selfish concoction of my own warped spiritual imagination. That struggle that Kierkegaard characterized as “the ethical suspension of the epistemological in light of the eschatological.” In somewhat plain language: how do you know what you know is in synch with God’s will?

Or, to put it even more to the point: I spend a lot of time trying to get God to do things my way. Just like Jonah.

The offense in the story of Jonah lies in God’s generosity to others. The offense of grace is not in the treatment we receive but in the observation that others are getting more than they deserve. When Jonah gets to Nineveh and does what God has told him to do, he gets angry with God that God has accepted such people. Forgiveness and generosity do not seem fair. It’s one thing to hear Our Lord’s words that God sends sun and rain on the just and the unjust, the good and the bad (Matthew 5:45), but it’s another thing when we’re good and we see bad people prosper, when we’re trying to live just lives and we see unjust people having a better life than we.

I listened to my eleven-year-old grandson and his eight-year-old sister as they would experience an infrequent quarrel this summer during our vacation. “It isn’t *fair!*” were the words that poured from their mouths most often. The idea of fairness comes earlier to them than the recognition of envy. The poor, the helpless, the uneducated, the unloved also cry out, “It isn’t *fair!*” And if fairness means anything they are right.

My now-departed, dear friend, Monsignor John Egan, one of our city’s great social prophets, called together a task force to deal with one of the major scandals of our economy, those pernicious institutions called Pay Day Loan Companies. They charge the working poor interest of up to 500 percent—a sum most of us who are not caught in the clutches of such greed cannot even imagine—to loan money until payday. Twenty states have laws against such bloodsuckers, but, of course, Illinois, which is one of the most corrupt in the Union, has no such law and has more than 200 such operations—over 100 of them in Chicago. Talk about what’s fair and unfair.

My friend Tom Geoghegan who occupies Clarence Darrow’s old office in the Chicago Temple building, has recently written the truth: we no longer live in a democracy but in a capitalistic legislative and executive system in which the highest bidder buys the law and the favor. Thus, in a state that ranks 49th in campaign finance laws, the payday loan people have their way.

We have a whole political system that now works on what the right-wing calls “the politics of envy.” Threatened elites—people like us—are trying to control the poor, the immigrants, the dispossessed, the new ethnics.

Our sin is still the one with which the Ten Commandments begins: the sin of idolatry. Just as desert mirages appear to be water, which is desperately needed, so many of our illusions are fed by advertising. We rush toward the mirage created by our own materialism, the promise that can never be delivered. And the people who write the copy know how to play on our deepest religious longings with subtle language: “Buick, Something to Believe In”; “Miller Beer—It Doesn’t Get Any Better Than This”; “GE, We Bring Good Things to Life.”

Idolatry is a misdirected form of worship, and the illusion that captures us is that we can find happiness in what we own, in the trips we take, the stocks and securities in which we invest so much time and energy as we play the market (living under the illusion that it’s “play”). Life is reduced to consumption. We sacrifice our souls for the mirage of glittering images.

And yet. If this is what the Kingdom of God is like, if God is not going to pay attention to those of us who work hard and do our duty and try to live good lives, what’s the point? Most of you have come to church today expecting what James Harr once called “a sit-com sermon,” that is, a sermon that is like what we watch on those 22-minute “situation-comedies” on television night after night. You know what I mean: situation (usually begun with a lie or something sexual—or in the case of “Seinfeld” something totally cynical) that is laughed about, lightly considered and neatly resolved by the end of the show. That’s the model of much of today’s preaching, particularly that Preaching Lite you see on television.

But life is not a sit-com, and our theological problems about unfairness cannot be so easily resolved. As Dimitri says and the Grand Inquisitor argues in Dostoevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, either God is not in control (which means God is powerless) or God is in control and chooses to do nothing to stop evil people. “If this is the way the universe is going to be run,” says Dimitri, “I hand back my ticket!”

We have to face the reality of unfairness and not dismiss it as “well, it seems to be unfair, but it really isn’t.” “All will work out in the end,” we so easily say—if it’s not our problem. “Trust in God” we tell each other but we also keep our powder dry, don’t we? There’s a deeper issue and it’s called trust. Or, we so glibly declare, “You have to yield yourself as Our Lord did on the last night of his life and simply say, ‘Not my will but thine be done.’”

But if you’ve had to bury your own child, if you are dying of cancer, if you have suffered loss of loved ones, of job, of faith itself—or if you suffer with people every day the way any pastor does, you know answers are not easy.

In 1939, as the Nazis were moving into the Netherlands, Hendrik Kramer, a Dutch theologian and pastor, was asked by a group of lay people, "Our Jewish neighbors are disappearing from their homes. What must we do?" Kramer answered, "I cannot tell you what to do. I can tell you who you are. You are followers of Jesus Christ. If you know who you are, you will know what to do." Those people from Kramer's church became part of the Dutch Resistance Movement. If we remember who we are, if we remember who our God is and that we are God's people, we will do things that please God.