

Sermon – “A Change of Heart”

Scripture Readings – Jonah 3:1-5, 10, 4:1-2, Mark 1:14-20

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Jonah 3:1-5, 10, 4:1-2. Most biblical scholars interpret the book of Jonah as a parable or an allegory, which borrowed the historical figure of Jonah to emphasize the message. Those who understand the story as an allegory see it as the unfolding history of Israel. Jonah symbolizes the nation of Israel. His running in the opposite direction symbolizes Israel not listening to the prophets before the exile about her obligation to the nations of the world. The storm reflects the political turmoil caused by the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions –the two political powers at this time. The time in the belly of the fish represents the Israelites exile in Babylon. The vomiting up of Jonah and Yahweh’s second call to go to Nineveh is seen as the restoration and the renewed opportunities following their return to Israel. Jonah’s bitterness and chastising of God for God’s mercy toward the Ninivites demonstrates the narrow attitude of the Jerusalem community toward other nations after the exile. Hear now the word of God.

*1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 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. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God's mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them; and God did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is found in the Gospel of Mark 1:14-20. As we read together Jesus’ call of his disciples, we are reminded that God asks each of us to participate in bringing the good news of God’s steadfast love and mercy to those we meet. The fish metaphor continues in this reading. Fishermen are called to become “fishers of men and women.” This is the word of God.

*14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*

The title of the sermon: "A Change of Heart"

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we are grateful that your steadfastness does not equate to stubbornness and that your constancy does not preclude a change of heart. Help us to make similar distinctions in our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

**Lectio Divina** is a traditional Benedictine practice of reading and meditating on Scripture. Along with reading a Bible passage several times prayerfully, the practice includes placing oneself within the story.

As I placed myself in the story of Jonah, I was surprised at how much I identified with this reluctant prophet. How many of us get asked to do things we don't want to do? For a while we might ignore the request...suppress our feelings...go in another direction. However, inevitably, unwittingly we act out our feelings and usually find ourselves in greater turmoil...symbolized in this story by the storm at sea.

When Jonah found himself thrown overboard, the big fish God sent to swallow him up and give him a "time out" was a gift to Jonah and an affirmation of what the psalmist proclaims. *Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Psalm 139)*

Thank God for a kindness and a mercy, a constancy and a steadfastness that is beyond our understanding... thank God for those times we find ourselves in the belly of a fish, waiting, praying and wading through our own stuff. It is crucial on our faith journeys for each of us to have a safe place to be honest, to be authentic in the presence of our Creator about our feelings, our doubts and disappointments, our fears and laments and those things we just don't feel like doing anymore.

I believe, with all my heart, that Jonah was only able to go to Nineveh because he spent time in the belly of that fish. Having a heart to heart with God made it possible for Jonah to have a change of heart and to reach out to those he didn't know or care about, even if he did it half-heartedly.

This is a wonderful story about a man, a fish, a "time out" and a second chance. However, there is more to the story. In the years following their return from exile to rebuild the temple in the sixth century BCE, the notion that Israel should reach out in compassion to share the knowledge of Yahweh,—a gracious and merciful God, was unthinkable. Sadly, they had become a community fearful of and hostile to the outside world, building walls rather than mending nets and being fishers of people. Surely they had good reason to be afraid. They had endured a great deal and yet, they had forgotten who they were and who their God called them to be, a beacon of light to the nations of the world. The anonymous Hebrew writer told the story of Jonah to confront this narrow perspective, this provincialism...to help the Jerusalem community see themselves more clearly and have a change of heart!

As the story unfolds, the Ninivites have a change of heart; Yahweh has a change of heart—but Jonah's stubbornness persists. He becomes angry, like the older brother of the prodigal son, who refuses to join in the celebration. Jonah prefers death to acknowledging God's favor to anyone but himself. The real tragedy is that Jonah is not a bad man. In fact, he's the only professedly religious character in the story.

According to William Graham, *Jonah's one devastating weakness is his individualism. To all who are not of the same mind and attainment as himself, he is cold, unsympathetic, arrogant and patronizing. He is a good man who consumes his own goodness and becomes a moral bankrupt in the eyes of the world.*

The message of Jonah is universal and timeless. It is important for all people, especially those of us who profess to be religious. In his book Reverence Paul Woodruff reminds us that faith is not always reverent. He writes, *because the faithful may hold their faith with arrogance and self-satisfaction.*

The story of Jonah reminds us that religion—one's faith in God, "our refuge," is never intended to be a secret fort or hiding place from the world that God creates, redeems and loves. What a timely message as we introduce the "Building a Legacy of Faith" Anniversary Endowment Campaign and conduct business at our 179<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Congregation.

Westminster has a rich history of reaching beyond its' walls. We affirm in our mission statement: *Westminster Presbyterian Church believes it is in the world for ministry...let the door of this church be a way to service.*

Peter and I first walked through the doors of Westminster the Spring of 2013, following my first conversation with the Pastor Nominating Committee. We scheduled a clandestine trip to check you out. We were both taken aback by the noble beauty of this historic church. The walls echoed with the loving care and nurture given to generations of children who have walked through these doors (and learned the story of Jonah)...the hallways reverberated with the ongoing commitment to the community through mission outreach.

Something I have discovered over the years about people is they want to be a part of something larger than their individual lives. They want to give to something they believe in, something that changes lives, and something they have confidence will be done well and with integrity.

**Building a Legacy of Faith** and investing in Westminster's Endowment Fund provides an opportunity for us to accomplish this. The increased earnings from a larger endowment will give us the ability to preserve this historic building and to open its' door through increased mission and benevolence giving. By becoming a part of the Albert Hale Circle, we honor the pastor who laid the cornerstone for the legacy of faith we are building together.

Today we celebrate the richness of our faith tradition and the prophet whose adventure on the sea reminds us of the character of the God we serve in Christ Jesus. Today we celebrate the wideness of God's mercy, the changing of God's heart and the God who invites us to a change of heart and to reach beyond ourselves. Amen.