

“Called to Change”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
John Knox Presbyterian Church

Jonah 3:1-10

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 from Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

This morning we have intentionally switched the order of the service around to give you a sense of change. It may have made some of you feel uncomfortable and some of you not so much. This is a blended service which always has a little different feel than the traditional or the contemporary. But in preparing for the service, Frank and I numbered the parts of the service and then took turns pulling the numbers out of a hat to get the order. Why did we do this?

The message that God is sending to the characters in our story today is the need for them to change. In the beginning of the book of Jonah, God is asking him to go into a direction that is totally out of his comfort zone. Jonah has been told to go to Nineveh.

Now Nineveh is a horrible place. It is filled with violence and evil. I liken it to the first time I went to Rockville Women’s Prison and I heard about the horrible crimes these women had committed. I liken it to the movie American Sniper where the Iraqis use women and children to help in fighting the war. I liken it to the places in Indianapolis where 135 people lost their lives last year to criminal homicides. This was a place where Jonah did not want to go. He had no interest in trying to save these despicable people!

Not to mention that Ninevites were gentiles and Jonah was a Jew. Was God crazy? He would be in a very foreign place. There would be no way that these people would welcome him. There would be no way that these people would even listen to him. Bottom line: These people in Jonah’s eyes deserved what they were going to get by God destroying them!

We are all familiar with the story from our children’s books. Jonah goes the opposite direction by getting on a boat headed toward Tarshish. The boat gets caught in a terrible storm. The crew begins to toss everything overboard in fear of their lives. When they find Jonah asleep downstairs in the hull of the ship, they ask him to cry for help from his God. Jonah immediately knows that God is behind this and he knows God has summoned him to face the music.

Jonah orders the men to throw him overboard into the depths of the sea. Then, the most amazing thing happens. Jonah is swallowed by a big, huge fish. Some believe it to be a whale. But whatever it was surprise, surprise - Jonah lives! He lives inside the fish for 3 days and nights!

We have no idea what happens inside the fish other than Jonah prays. There is no doubt in my mind that Jonah is uncomfortable. Who would be comfortable in the belly of a cold, wet, smelly

fish? Interesting about this prayer that Jonah utters, he is not very gracious. There is a lot of begging and blaming God. You wonder why God sent Jonah as God's messenger. At first you feel sorry for the guy for being sent to Nineveh. But, it becomes apparent that Jonah is not really a nice guy. He needs a change of heart.

The story goes on with the fish spewing Jonah onto dry land. What a great shot this fish has! Jonah has no other choice but to go to Nineveh. So off he goes to this great city covered in whale spit! What a sight he was! You would have thought the people would have taken one look at Jonah and laughed their heads off. But something happens when Jonah gives his one line sermon to the folks of Nineveh, because when he cries out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown," they change!

The Ninevites proclaim a fast. They believe in God and begin to turn from their old ways. Nineveh changes! The character that fascinates me is the king. This man with all honor and prestige takes off his glorious purple, gold trimmed robe and puts on sackcloth and ashes. Then he declares that all of Nineveh put on their sackcloth, don't eat, don't drink and cry to the mighty God. He even includes the animals!

Now, have you ever put on sackcloth? Nor have I. But from what I can tell it was very scratchy because it was made from goat's fur. When you google image it, you come up with burlap. Have you ever wrapped yourself in burlap? It is very scratchy and it stinks! Now, have you ever spent a lot of time around a campfire or cleaned out a fireplace? If you have, you know how messy ashes are and how dirty you feel when you are covered with them. I know this from cooking over a campfire during my days of being a Girl Scout. This putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes had to have been uncomfortable.

But the people of Nineveh did it as a sign of true repentance. Because it was so uncomfortable, it showed a person's humility and a visible sign of a change of heart. The people of Nineveh were transformed and that in turn transformed God. God's mind was changed and Nineveh was saved!

This is where I want to stand up and applaud for the saving of these people. You would think that Jonah would be pretty proud of himself for with one line he was able to convert the entire city. But Jonah is not happy! He is very ticked off at God. He goes off and pouts and fusses under the shade of a bush. Then God kind of gives Jonah a poke when God sends a worm to devour the bush, leaving Jonah in the hot heat. He wants to die! God wonders why Jonah is so upset about the bush. Why would he not be more concerned about the 120,000 people who were saved in Nineveh? The story ends with Jonah miserable and unhappy. He just doesn't get it!

How do you react to the call to change? Are you like the people of Nineveh, quick to respond? Or are you like Jonah, reluctant even when it is so uncomfortable you can't stand it? If you are like me, it probably depends on how severe the change is. And it probably depends on how much pestering God does to make you change? Do you need to be spit out of a fish to realize that God is calling you to turn around and take a different way?

It took me three years to finally get that I was to consider walking the Camino. I could not picture myself walking 500 miles. It seemed impossible! And yet, God kept calling. Now that I have done it, there is this part of me that wants to go back to that simple life. When you are out in the middle of nowhere walking, it is like you are in your own little Camino bubble. The reality of life and the world's problems seems so far away.

As I have begun a new year, my Spiritual Director has asked me "what my Spiritual word is for 2015?" This is a word that God places on your heart and you let it guide you through the year. Last year, my word was "walking" – no shocker there! This year, God has been telling me my word and I keep saying, "I don't like my word!" My word is "positive". The reason I don't like that word is that I

find it difficult sometimes to be positive. Staying positive no matter what is tough when there is negative gossip, people dying, people leaving the church, people getting sick and so on and so on. I was in a meeting the other day with other ministers in our Presbytery. There was a minister who was going on and on about the horrible state of his congregation and he is worn out! I walked away from the meeting thankful that we at John Knox are healthy but I was worn out! It was so easy to get sucked into the negativity! So, I have answered the call to turn the negative things in my life into positive ones by looking for the goodness of God. I have had this amazing positive experience of walking the Camino and I want to hold onto it in a healthy way. I know that I am not going to be perfect. This doesn't mean that I don't want people sharing their problems with me. I am your pastor. This is my call and I am here to stay. I enjoy talking with you and walking side-by-side in whatever you face. But it does make me realize how I need to respond and act. And I want you to hold me accountable! I need to stay positive.

We will be installing and ordaining new officers in the church today. I give thanks to God to these folks who have heard the call from God to turn and follow the path of an elder, deacon or trustee. There will be times when these duties of discipleship will be uncomfortable. It may be uncomfortable when these people are faced with tough decisions that deal with the future of our church. It may be uncomfortable and tough when these people are called to be with a member who is ill or dying. It may be uncomfortable when these people are asked to do something that takes them out of their comfort zone. It may be uncomfortable when these people are faced with sensitive discussions about the life of our congregation. But they have heard the call of God and they have agreed to put on sackcloth and ashes and serve or maybe they have heard the call of God and they have agreed to go to Nineveh.

Is God nudging you to turn and walk in a new direction? What does that look like? I want you to all stand, turn to your left 90 degrees (where is God calling you to change?), turn to your left again 90 degrees (Is there something that you are resisting because you know it will make you uncomfortable?), turn again 90 degrees (know that even though you resist, God is still hanging in there with you). Okay, you can sit back down. You should feel lucky. I was going to have you change seats; kind of like that game upset the fruit basket, which I played years ago as a child. I believe God gives us this peculiar story of Jonah so that we can ask ourselves where God is calling us to change. If God calls you to go to Nineveh, will you go? If God calls you to repent and follow God's direction, will you do it? If God calls you to perhaps be a little uncomfortable, will you answer? Thanks be to God for in the midst of call there is change and in the midst of change there is transformation. Amen!