

Lasting Change

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Prophets of doom have been around for a long time. Especially in an election year, economists, politicians, sociologists, and observers of all kinds will tell us that we are on the precipice, headed towards self-destruction. Of course, there is plenty of evidence in their favor these days. The economy still seems to be in a recession. The national debt is staggering. Pick up the newspaper (or just click online) and you read about violence and human destructiveness seemingly everywhere.

Moral decay is evident today. Recently in the newspaper I saw an article that indicated Las Vegas casinos have lost billions in recent years with the downturn of the economy. My immediate thought was, “Well, can’t say I’m disappointed about that!” I admit I’ve never quite understood the appeal of Las Vegas. I just don’t get it. I’ve walked through several casinos and it seems to me that most of the money being lost there is coming from social security checks. The people sitting playing the slots all look like they’re retired, with a drink and maybe a smoke, with not much going on in their lives. Nothing like the commercials I see on TV with young attractive people winning at the gaming tables. “Just the right amount of wrong” is the new advertising campaign. As a minister I can’t help but wonder how there can be just “the right amount of wrong.” Does that mean it we’ll only “kind of” damage your life? “Sort of” destroy your relationships? “Barely” ruin your finances?

Jonah was a reluctant prophet of doom sent by God to Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) to preach judgment against the city. It might be compared to God sending me to Las Vegas (“Sin City”) to preach on “the strip” about all that is wrong with what happens there. It is not a job I’m likely to apply for.

The text today records the second time God tells Jonah to “get up and go to Nineveh.” The first time he went the other way, to Tarshish, running as fast as he could in the

other direction. You all know the story; a storm came up on the sea and he was thrown overboard by the crew; then swallowed by a fish; and washed up on shore, eventually deciding it was in his best interest to do what God commanded. The story of Jonah is a story about the irresistible will of God; if we don't bow willingly to the Lord, we will have to bow unwillingly. But it is also a story about the remarkable willingness of God to forgive, even those who we wish would never be forgiven. With this God, there is always a chance for a new beginning.

Yesterday I provided an invocation for one of our members of the church who is running for election for the 49th district assembly seat, Dr. Matthew Lin. He opened his campaign headquarters on Las Tunas yesterday in San Gabriel and I was honored to be invited to pray at the dedication ceremony. I listened as politician after politician proclaimed just how bad things are in the State of California, and just why someone like Dr. Lin is so needed. He is a man of character and compassion with successful business acumen. Dr. Lin feels called to try and make a difference in Sacramento. He spoke with me about his growing concern for the people who visit the hospitals in our area. One of the hospitals in his group has 20% of the emergency room visits from people without any insurance or means to pay. Most business people would close it down because it's losing money, but what then happens to the people it serves? There are major problems to address in society and the tensions seem to be mounting for class conflict. The former Mayor of San Marino, Dr. Lin has given his medical services to those in need following earthquakes, typhoons, and floods all over the world.

On the eve of the Chinese New Year, those gathered yesterday are hoping for a new beginning. One must first believe a new beginning is still possible. While the situation is difficult, it is possible to turn it around. With God, there is always a chance for a new beginning.

Before he dropped out of the Republican Presidential primary in South Carolina, Rick Parry (the Governor of Texas) made a comment that drew criticism and a swift rebuttal from Turkey. He suggested that Turkey is "ruled by what many perceive to be

Islamic terrorists,” raising questions about its NATO membership. Turkey’s Foreign Ministry released a scathing statement saying Parry’s comments were “baseless and inappropriate” and then suggested that the United States has no time to waste with candidates “who do not even know their allies.”

Imagine for a moment that Governor Rick Parry was chosen by God to “get up, and go to Istanbul,” that great Turkish city, and proclaim a message of judgment and condemnation. That is what it must have been like for Jonah. You can understand why he ran the other way! The Assyrians were a threat from the north, and barbarians in his view. But the will of God is irresistible! So Jonah finally does what God calls him to do. The reluctant prophet is more effective than he wants to be. The people of Nineveh actually repent from their evil and violent ways, and so the disaster Jonah predicted didn’t occur. There was nothing in the message to suggest that repentance was even possible. But the people “believed God” and “turned from their evil ways and from the violence” and God “changed his mind” and spared them. Sometimes those outside the community of faith are more open to God’s ways than those of us within it. They see more possibilities than we do. Jonah began to look like a liar, a false prophet. His reputation destroyed, his enemies saved, Jonah was “angry enough to die.” That kind of anger, the kind that leads you to want someone else to die, is caustic will eat you up inside.

Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Whatever is begun in anger ends in shame.” Mark Twain wrote, “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.” Fredrick Buechner elaborates on that theme,

“Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Jonah's bitterness becomes toxic. He learned that how one deals with enemies, how one nation deals with another, is of great concern to God. Jonah discovered that God's judgment is meant to lead to repentance, not destruction.

Abraham Lincoln understood the radical nature of God's forgiveness and the importance of it for the healing of a nation. Toward the end of the Civil War, in the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln encouraged both North and South toward the conclusion of the war with the words inscribed on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right; as God gives us to see the right; let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds. . . ."

It is surprising that the Book of Jonah even made it into the Bible. It is critical of prophets generally and self-critical of Israel's willingness to write off its neighbors. That certainly has implications for international relations. But it also has implications for us personally. The story of Jonah is a story about the irresistible will of God; if we don't bow willingly to the Lord, we will have to bow unwillingly. But it is also a story about the remarkable willingness of God to forgive, even those who we wish would never be forgiven. With God, there is always a chance for a new beginning.

What in your life have you given up on? Who have you written off? Where have you decided that the dye is already cast, the outcome is inevitable, and there is no coming back any longer? Or maybe you have just given up on yourself! The addiction will never be overcome, "I'll never change – I'll always overeat, or I can't stop gambling, or I'll always shoot my mouth off and hurt others." We do "reap what we sow" in life and we surely have to deal with the consequences of our actions, behaviors, and thoughts. But with God there is always a chance for a new beginning. And it can lead to lasting change in our lives and in our society. It is never too late to turn around.

Things are not fixed and static in the world. We can effect lasting change. We are not merely victims of powers beyond our control but free agents in the world, by God's

January 22, 2012

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grace. Each new day is filled with new possibilities to change our lives and to live as God would have us live. So don't miss the opportunity to straighten what has grown crooked in your life. The Lord will help you. "Believe the good news of the Gospel, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven." God's irresistible grace is inviting us to change, to let go of our anger, and to begin again to live towards the salvation the Lord intends for us all. Amen