

The Conversion of Jonah?

by Patty Friesen (Aug. 11/19)

I thought of Jonah this week on my women's canoe trip while we were in storms and succumbing to grouchiness. Thankfully no one was tossed overboard and swallowed by a sturgeon. Jonah is a delightful story of reluctance and resistance all along the way of Jonah's dramatic journey from Tarsus to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea to the belly of the whale and back to Nineveh. The book is full of irony and hyperbole and humour that makes us laugh at Jonah but in doing so – we may find ourselves laughing in the mirror.

The book of Jonah is likely written after the exile under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah who were trying to create a new exclusive national identity loyal to Yahweh. Jonah is nationalistic - pro-Israel and anti-Assyrian. When God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel's enemy and preach to them, Jonah finds God's request intolerable and escapes on a ship going the opposite direction. This escape from God proves futile as God sends a storm and when the sailors ask Jonah how to appease God and calm the storm, he doesn't say, "row back to shore so I can go to Nineveh like God wants." No, Jonah would rather be thrown overboard than go to Nineveh, which is exactly what the sailors do – sacrifice him to the sea.

Jonah's name means "dove" in Hebrew and doves were used in sacrifice to God. Jonah is sacrificed to God when he is tossed overboard to calm the storm. But if Jonah thought he could escape God at the bottom of the sea, he's wrong again. God is not going to let Jonah out of sight and sends a whale to swallow him for 3 days. The book of Jonah gives us a close up view of Jonah but it is also a close up view of God and God's consistent character of mercy versus Jonah's moodiness and inconsistency.

In the belly of the whale, in chapter 2, Jonah turns back to God, which is the definition of conversion - turning and Jonah gets spit out onto land. In chapter 3, Jonah gets a new start on the road to Nineveh but he doesn't like it any better than he did the first time. Here the focus

shifts from Jonah to the city of Nineveh which has 120,000 citizens, a king and lots of animals. Jonah planned for 40 days of preaching and revival meetings but the people believe him on the first day and proclaim a fast and everyone puts on sackcloth including the king and the animals. The last time a king repented in sackcloth and ashes was King David so here is a subtle literary and spiritual connection between the enemy king of Assyria and the great king of Israel. The citizens of Nineveh are as eager to believe in God's mercy as the Greek sailors were. And sure enough, when God saw their heartfelt repentance and how they changed their minds, God repented as well and changed mind about bringing calamity upon Nineveh. Repentance has a powerful ripple effect in heaven as on earth. Everyone is repenting or turning from their intended direction except Jonah.

Jonah chapter 4 - But God's conversion was displeasing to Jonah and he became very angry and prayed this prayer: Out of my distress I called you, O Lord, but you did not answer me. I refused to preach repentance to the Ninevites, but you forced me. When I sailed away in the opposite direction, you hurled a violent wind at me. Your monster swallowed me and returned me to your path. Repentance I would not preach in Nineveh, rather I cursed them, "Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed." But you did not listen to me. You listened to the people of Nineveh as they sat in ashes covered with sackcloth. I am angry because you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish. If you will not destroy Nineveh then give me death. It is better for me to die than to see my enemy live.

Then Jonah sat in the hot sun and waited for the destruction of Nineveh. God grew a bush to provide shade and Jonah was happy about that. God sent a worm to eat the bush and Jonah was mad again and wanted to die of heatstroke.

4:9 But God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the bush? And Jonah said, yes, angry enough to die. Then the Lord said, you are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are.

more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not now their right hand from their left and also many animals? The story of Jonah ends here with a question mark whether Jonah ever experiences his own conversion and compassion with regard to his enemies, the people of Nineveh.

In the movie titled *The Best of Enemies*, the city of Durham, North Carolina was struggling with integrating their public schools with black and white students in 1971. The city had already integrated its restaurants and buses but public schools was the last hold out for integration and a rallying cry for the Klu Klux Klan who forced status quo through their violent intimidation of Durham citizens. Klan leader C.P. Ellis, a struggling gas station owner sincerely believed in the inferiority of blacks and integration as a social and economic threat to his way of life. Ann Atwater was a local black activist who pushes the City Council of Durham on all kinds of issues. The racial divide came to a head when a black elementary school mysteriously had a fire and the city had to decide whether to integrate the public elementary schools or to continue to let the black students attend schools in split shifts in a smoking building.

A black mediator was brought in to negotiate the civil discussions and vote for integration. He used the organizing system of a Charette - a process of building communication across racial divides. He asked KKK leader C.P. Ellis and civil rights leader Ann Atwater to chair the Charette. It was an amazingly difficult process that required compromise on both sides and delicate negotiations with deep-rooted distrust and hate. It was a process that forced integration by making opposite sides eat lunch together in the cafeteria. It was a process that led to the conversion of both Ann Atwater and CP Ellis to find common ground and even relationship that lasted until their deaths.

The Best of Enemies is a rich story of prejudice, and surprising conversions, revealing that anyone can have a change of heart. The book of Jonah is also a rich story of prejudice and surprising conversions and a God who cares about moody prophets, humanity and animals and all of creation. If the evil Ninevites can change, and God can change, then can we change?

This is the truth about conversion - not that we suddenly change in essence, magically becoming new people, with all our old faults left behind. What happens is more subtle. In the words of Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace*,

“In the process of conversion, the detestable parts of ourselves do not vanish so much as become transformed. We can't run from who we are, with our short tempers, our vanity, our sharp tongues, our talents for self-aggrandizement, self-delusion or despair. But we can convert, in its root meaning of turn around, so that we are forced to face ourselves as we really are. We can pray that God will take our faults and use them for the good. God knows we have problems letting bygones be bygones, within our families, in the workplace, and in church. Maybe that's where God has been contending with us, engaging us in the process of conversion, in the midst of the messes of life. (p. 297, 299)

Conversion in the midst of the messes of life. The story of Jonah invites a larger understanding of faithfulness to God, which goes beyond tradition. Jonah the prophet, the self-described faithful Hebrew pales in faithfulness compared to the pagan Greek sailors who seek to do the right thing and the pagan Ninevites who turn to God. This reminds the Hebrews that they are not the only ones who know God and who are capable of following in God's ways.

Humour and the ability to laugh at our assumptions and prejudices reduces arrogance and pride. When we laugh at our shortcomings, we remember the Great God beneath us who is the true Savior of the world. The apostle Paul does this better than anyone in the New Testament. He regularly cites the fact that he is from the least of the Jewish tribes and that he was a jerk when he persecuted the followers of Christ. Despite all this, Jesus appeared to him and called him to serve. Despite his past, God saw fit to use him. God loves us and saves us in spite of all we have done and the messes we have made. Jonah and Paul, CP Ellis and Ann Atwater are inviting us to take ourselves a little less seriously than we often do. God is bigger and more forgiving than we can ever be – with ourselves and with others – so let's roll up our

sleeves and faithfully and lightly embrace the enemies that God sets before us. They may be agents of our reluctant conversion.

Let us pray: Forgiving God, we hear our own anger, prejudices and resentments towards others in scripture today. Looking at Jonah is frighteningly like looking in the mirror sometimes. Help us O God to be more like you. Help us change our minds and attitudes, even as you change yours from judgment to understanding and mercy. Amen.