

Sermon: God Changed His Mind

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, January 21, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Albert Einstein does believe in God. I don't know if that comes as a real surprise to you. The most brilliant scientific mind of the 20th century is a believer. But the God he believes in does not quite correspond to what is revealed in the Scripture. In fact Einstein himself stated, "I am not an atheist, and I don't think I can call myself a pantheist...I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists."

You got to love this brilliant thinker who quotes another brilliant thinker in formulating his conception of God. Spinoza refers to Baruch Spinoza, a 17th century philosopher who published 'Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order', speculated, among other things, in the nature of God. I won't go into too much details, but suffice to say that both Spinoza and Einstein saw God as a 'lawgiver' who sets the laws of the universe in motion, then retreat into background, never to re-engage again. They do not believe in a personal God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings. They see God as totally other, fully impassible and immutable.

Now these philosophical descriptions of God—impassible and immutable—are also well accepted doctrines of the Christian faith. The doctrine of impassibility asserts that nothing external can affect God. Take for example, there is guy standing on your right, and you are to his left. If he should move to your left, you are now on his right. Does that change you? No, of course not. His position vis-à-vis to you has changed, but that does not fundamentally alter your position nor who you are. Thus nothing external can cause God to be in any state, and in particular can cause him to feel negative motions like grief or regret. The doctrine of immutability takes it one step further. It asserts that God cannot undergo real or intrinsic change in any respect, whether externally or internally caused. In essence, God cannot even change the God-self, should God ever want to.

We find these philosophical and doctrinal descriptions of God in the writings of the early church fathers, such as Origen and Augustine. We find them in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1213, and the First Vatican Council of

1868. We find them in sermons preached by contemporary preachers, painting a picture of God who is unchanging, unyielding, faithful, reliable and immovable.

I get it, I see the allure of such God, in a world that is rapidly moving, always changing, too fast in my opinion. I too wouldn't mind a God who is impassible, immutable and immovable. However, that is not who God is, at least not the God revealed to us in the Scripture.

The Lectionary passage today takes us to Jonah, in chapter 3, when the word of the Lord came to the prophet a second time, saying "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Keep in mind when the same word reached Jonah the first time, he fled, and went the opposite way. Jonah, who saw himself as a true prophet of Israel, did not want to proclaim any word to the Nenevites, citizens of the capital of the Assyrian Empire, in the present day Iraq.

Now the Assyrians, in the time of Jonah, were notoriously brutal and cruel. Their warrior-like nature had taken them far and wide in the Ancient Near East, conquering nations after nations. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was defeated and dismantled by the Assyrian in 722 BC. Archeological dig of the tomb of Sennacherib the king, yielded wall relief depicting the siege of Lachish, a fortified town south-west of Jerusalem, where prisoners were brought before the high king, to be executed and impaled. All that is to say, we should sympathize with Jonah, for not wanting to preach against the Nenevites. They were Israel's mortal enemy, they are a clear and present danger to the prophet, and most importantly, they do not deserve a chance to repent or to be saved.

However, God had God's own way and who was to question or disobey God. So God sent a whale, or to be more precise a large fish to swallow up the prophet, so to allow him to stew in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Only when the prophet repented and vow to do what God had initially called him to do, did God relent and commanded the fish to vomit Jonah out, onto dry ground.

So the prophet, with a renewed sense of the call, but still the same message, went to the city. He went into the heart of the city about a day's walk, and cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

I don't know if you have recently visited downtown Ottawa. If you were anywhere near Rideau or Wellington street, you might have run into street criers. I call them criers, because they are always crying, or more precisely shouting at the top of their lung, some unintelligible messages

mixing in noise of traffic in the background. The only way to kind of discern what they are shouting about are the large signs they usually carry, with writings conveying one cause or another. Most people simply walk by, paying scant attention to these criers—their messages unheeded.

Yet, here we have Jonah, a foreigner in a strange city, crying out a briefest of message, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” No explanation, no cause, heck, Jonah didn’t even bother to identify in whose authority he was pronouncing such woe...forty more days, you are done! Finito! Hasta la vista, baby! One can almost sense the prophet’s gleefulness in such pronouncement.

Yet, yet, miraculously, the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, including the king, put on sackcloth and repented, and turned from their evil ways, making Jonah the most effective prophet and preacher in the history of humankind.

But for the purpose to today sermon, here is the more important part, in verse 10, “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.”

God changed his mind! The Hebrew verb used here for changing mind is נָחַם (nacham), translated as ‘to regret’, ‘to be sorry’, ‘to comfort’ or as in King James Version of the Bible, ‘to repent’. It is an 180 degree turning around of both thoughts and action, that really should be reserved for humanity, as in the case of the Ninevites, and certainly not in the case the divine.

Yet, here we have God repenting and changing his mind. What is going on? And if you think this is an one-off, in a book most biblical scholars considered as fictional not factual, or the author employing literary device or wielding dramatic licence carelessly, think again. In the Old Testament, we see God being associated with ‘nacham’ or repenting in at least five other occasions—in Genesis 6, Judges 2, 1 Samuel 15, 2 Samuel 24, Joel 2, and of course here in Jonah 3. In all instances, the direct cause for God to change his mind was always the behaviour of people. The turning around or repentance of individuals, move God to turn around and to change his mind. Whereas, should a person turn towards evil and ignores God’s repeated warning, then inevitably God will not only withhold blessings previously announced, but to eventually punish, or even destroy.

Jonah will find out in time, they way of God is not only just, but also merciful. Just like the second clause of the Second Commandment,

speaking of God punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject God, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generations of those who love the Lord and keep God's commandments. Or as the psalmist praises in Psalm 103,

*“The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.”*

In time, this so-called impassable, immutable, and immovable God, moved the Godself, and came down to us, the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). And it is this Christ Jesus, God's beloved and anointed, who had first called the disciples to follow, on the shore of the sea of Galilee, and is now calling us also, “Come, follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

So we follow, and give thanks, knowing the goodness, the steadfast love of God, endures forever.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**