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God Changed His Mind: Re-Imagining the Jonah Narrative

CHRISTOPHER CHESNUTT

Author's Preface

I initially preached this sermon for the Prineville Church of Christ in Prineville, Oregon on Sunday, June 24, 2012, as part of my “tryout” for the church’s preaching ministry position. (I’ve preached it in several different contexts since then.) Following the reading of Jonah 4.1–11, my sermon opens and concludes with the singing of Frederick William Faber’s hymn, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.”¹

Scripture Reading: Jonah 4.1–11

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade, and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed up the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.” But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Hymn: “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.”

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner,
And more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior;
There is healing in His blood.

1. <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/t/t490.html> (accessed October 30, 2012).

For the love of God is broader
 Than the measure of man's mind;
 And the heart of the Eternal
 Is most wonderfully kind.
 If our love were but more faithful,
 We should take Him at His word;
 And our life would be thanksgiving
 For the goodness of the Lord.

My memory of these words was jogged as I read through the book of Jonah in eager anticipation of preaching today. On the surface, Jonah seems like an easy narrative: a fun VeggieTales story with a great big fish and a simple message. Yet the more I've wrestled with and come to appreciate this whale-of-a-tale's difficult message, the more I've realized that it raises far more questions than you'd expect. Just when you think you understand it, you realize that you've missed the point. Just when you think you've got it all figured it, you're thrown for a loop with a word or a phrase that you hadn't given much attention. As St. Jerome, the great fourth-century scholar who translated the Hebrew and Greek scriptures into Latin, says, "The Scriptures are shallow enough for a babe to come and drink without fear of drowning, and deep enough for theologians to swim in without ever reaching the bottom."²

Maybe that's the whole point—mystery. Jonah is known as a prophet, yet the book never calls him a prophet. The other prophetic writings contain almost all poetry, prophetic oracles of doom and hope, and sermons, but Jonah consists solely of narrative. The other prophetic writings give us a historical setting—not so with Jonah. While many of the prophetic writings have a few oracles directed to the foreign nations, Jonah is the only prophet whom God sends to a foreign nation: to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian Empire—the "Evil Empire" and the oppressive arch-enemy of God's covenant people. The Assyrian Empire—a notorious abuser of human rights, who waterboarded their war victims and detained indefinitely the prisoners of war they took in Israel. The Assyrian Empire—whose foreign policy was hatred, violence and terror. The Assyrian Empire—of whom the prophet Nahum writes this X-rated poem in Nahum 3.1–3: "How terrible it will be for Nineveh! It is a city of murders! It is full of liars! It's filled with stolen goods! The killing never stops! Whips crack! Wheels clack! Horses charge! Chariots rumble! Horsemen attack! Swords flash! Spears gleam! Many people die. Dead bodies pile up. They can't even be counted. People trip over them."

From the outset of Jonah, the narrative is thick with irony. Irony is to imply the opposite of what you say: to describe your "30,000-square-foot residence" as "my humble estate." Irony is when an event occurs that's the opposite of what you'd expect. A lifeguard drowns. A heart surgeon dies of a heart attack. A man is fatally shot while taking a course on firearm safety. Our beloved Congress convenes an all-male panel to discuss female reproduction. Metta World Peace of the Los Angeles Lakers gets ejected from a basketball game for displaying violent behavior against James Harden of the Oklahoma City Thunder. According to Jonah 1.1, Jonah is "the son of Amittai," which in Hebrew means, "son of faithfulness."

Yet Jonah is far from faithful. Jonah runs away from God, but he's willing to die to save the pagan sailors. The pagan sailors pray when they're in danger, but Jonah sleeps. Jonah tells the pagan sailors to throw him overboard: seemingly an act of courage, yet he should have responded, "Take me back to port."

Jonah, an Israelite who worships Yahweh, puts the pagan sailors in danger, but the pagan sailors try their best to save this stranger. Jonah's disobedience leads the pagan sailors to offer sacrifices and vows to Israel's God. Jonah disobeys God and even wishes he were dead, yet God saves him. The bizarre and ironic nature of Jonah continues in Jonah 2. In the belly of the fish, Jonah sings a song of prayer to God.

On the one hand, this prayer is very beautiful and pious. On the other hand, it is very self-centered. Jonah refers to himself twenty-three times, but God is mentioned only thirteen times. Even the end of the prayer

2. http://www.christianarsenal.com/Christian_Arsenal/Quotes.html (accessed October 30, 2012).

sounds quite beautiful and pious; yet coming from Jonah's mouth, it sounds hypocritical: "Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I, with the sacrifice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed, I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

Immediately following this prayer, the fish "vomits" Jonah out—oh, what a lovely image! Jonah 3 begins like Jonah 1. It's *déjà vu*: all the running away, storms, prayers, rowing and a big fish. Except this time, Jonah heeds God's words and—although reluctantly—goes to Nineveh. When he gets there, his Sunday sermon is very short—in Hebrew, only five words long. This "doom-and-gloom" message contains no hope, no call for repentance, no second chances, and no mention of God: "In forty days, you're toast." Maybe it's because we're so used to this narrative, or maybe it's because we're so far removed from it that we don't see the shocking thing that happens next. These people don't even know God! They have never heard of Yahweh, the God of Israel! But after five simple words, the entire population now "believes" in God! They fast and put on sackcloth—even the king and the animals do—in the hopes that God will change his mind. And, according to Jonah 3.10, "God changed His mind."

Does this square with your picture of God and with your definition of the all-powerful, all-knowing one? Yahweh, the Creator and ruler of the universe, "changes his mind" and does not "shock and awe" Iraq—ahem, Nineveh!—like he'd promised.³ And while this scene would make the perfect storybook ending to Jonah, the bizarre and ironic nature of the narrative doesn't end here. When we arrive in Jonah 4, Jonah is angry with God because of God's slowness to get angry with the Ninevites: "I knew you are merciful and loving," he shouts, "and I knew that you would keep your word!" Jonah knows his Israelite theology: God is full of mercy, longsuffering, abounding in steadfast love and forgiving from generation to generation. He knows his Hebrew Bible, but he gets the application wrong. As my good friend David Fleer observes, "When it comes to others, we tend to believe that God's justice should outweigh His mercy. When it comes to us, we tend to believe that God's mercy should outweigh His justice."⁴ Jonah says, "Wrongs need to be righted! Justice must be served! So, Lord, hold these evildoers accountable! Give them their 'just deserts' for their crimes against humanity: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But, Lord, since I'm not like those wicked Assyrians, please be merciful to me." Indeed, God does practice justice.

As the prophet Nahum writes in Nahum 1.2–3: "The Lord is a jealous God who punishes people. He pays them back for the evil things they do. His anger burns against them. The Lord punishes his enemies. He holds his anger back until the right time to use it. The Lord is slow to get angry. He is very powerful. The Lord will not let the guilty people go without punishing them."

There are laws where God demands that his people practice justice against wrongdoers—even carrying out the death penalty. There are plenty of examples in scripture of God and his people doing just that—but not here; not in this instance. Here, God chooses to change his mind because of pity. He pities the Assyrians and even their animals! How bizarre and ironic! A God who creates danger for people, forgives people without hope, gives second chances, changes his mind and might save people just for their animals—and then concludes with a question. Not a summary statement, conclusion, or answer—an open question, and a very abrupt one at that: "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" What kind of narrative, speech, or sermon ends with an abrupt, open question? On the one hand, we're tempted to say, "What a strange and contradictory God! He says he never changes, yet here, he changes his mind!"

On the other hand, maybe it is we who are the strange ones. Maybe we're so caught up in our logic; our scientific, traditional, pattern-searching, my-opinion-is-better-than-yours intellectual culture that we forget that God, in order to truly be the God whom we believe him to be, must be a mystery to us. As Matt Redman says, "If God were small enough to understand, He wouldn't be large enough to be worshipped."⁵

3. Tongue-in-cheek: Nineveh was located in present-day Iraq, which the United States invaded in March of 2003, the military operation being entitled, Shock and Awe.

4. Thanks to Dr. David Fleer, professor of Bible and communication and special assistant to the president at David Lipscomb University in Nashville, TN, for sharing this quotation with me.

5. I heard Matt Redman say this when he led worship. (October 30, 2012).

A God whom we can define is no God at all. A God whom we can limit is an idol of our own making. When we say, “Lord, you would never do that,” we’ve assumed the place of God! As Anne Lamott puts it, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all of the same people as you do.”⁶

Jonah is not just an Israelite from Palestine, called out of anonymity to perform a difficult task for God. He is a human being. He is every person. He is me. He is you. He is the paradigm of our resistance to being chosen by God for a task that is much greater than we are. God has called us to a task that goes far beyond our individual wants, desires and comfort zones. Jonah gets on a ship and tries to run away from the very presence of God, unsettling people and possibilities. We also run away from the very presence of God, unsettling people and possibilities. In March of 2003, when the Iraq War broke out, a young student from a Christian university wrote a letter to the student newspaper, asking, “Why are Bible-believing Christians in the US supporting the war instead of preaching Christ to the millions of Muslims who’ve never heard?” One person responded to this young student, saying, “The reason Bible-believing Christians in the US support the war instead of preaching Christ to the millions of Muslims who’ve never heard is because Christians in the US have exchanged the Jesus-narrative for Caesar’s narrative and, therefore, have forfeited their ability to preach the gospel in the Islamic world.”⁷ We’re more easily identified as Americans, Democrats, Republicans and Tea Partiers than we are as Christians. We’re more ready to drop bombs than we are to enact God’s shalom as envisioned in the prophetic tradition, the Sermon on the Mount and Romans 12. We’re more eager to demand fire from above to rain down upon people from the wrong church, abusive family members, cantankerous coworkers, rabble-rousing roommates, child molesters, abortion doctors, homosexuals, immigrants, corrupt politicians, terrorists and modern-day Assyrians like Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, Osama Bin Laden, Joseph Kony and Saddam Hussein than we are to take up our crosses, love our enemies, and humbly pray: “[for w]hen it comes to others, we tend to believe that God’s justice should outweigh His mercy [but w]hen it comes to us, we tend to believe that God’s mercy should outweigh His justice.” Yet, as Portia tells Shylock in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
 ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown.
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
 It is enthroned in the heart of kings,
 It is an attribute of God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
 That in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy.⁸

6. Thanks to Dr. Darryl Tippens, provost and professor of English literature at Pepperdine University in Malibu, CA, for sharing this quotation with me; http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7113.Anne_Lamott?auto_login_attempted=true (accessed October 30, 2012).

7. Thanks again to Dr. David Fleer for sharing this quotation with me.

8. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 4, scene 1.

Like Shylock, Jonah is certainly a character who can interpret all of us if we will allow him to. His misguided anger and his severely flawed concepts of God and of justice can surely critique every last one of us. But as critically important as all of this is, Jonah is not the hero in this narrative. By paying so much attention to Jonah and the great big fish, we miss the much greater God. Instead of asking, “What are Jonah and the great big fish like?” we should be asking, “What’s this great big God like?”

This is a God who calls someone to a task that challenges everything he is and thinks. This is a God who hurls a powerful storm to kill people who just happen to be in the wrong place, but who sends a big fish to save a man who had defiantly disobeyed him. This is a God who gives the man a second chance who would rather die than obey him. This is a God who stands ready to destroy the world’s greatest superpower, yet seems ready to save it if only for the innocent animals. This is a God who changes his mind. This is a God who is always bigger than we can imagine, more complex than we can fathom, and often more surprising than he is predictable. This is a God who is so diverse that we dare not put him in a box and define him “our way.” As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “We nailed God down once, and he got away.”⁹ This is unsettling because we cannot be sure at any time what new and challenging thing he might require of us. Wouldn’t you rather say, like Jonah, “Lord, I know what you think and want; therefore, I know how you’ll act.”

How do we react to a God who is such a mystery? Shall we work harder and harder in our mental efforts? Shall we get mad and angry at him and even take out our rage on others? Shall we arrogantly presume to “have all the answers”—or even to believe that we’re “entitled” to them? Jonah invites us to stop scientifically analyzing and dissecting God as an object and to start worshipping God as our Creator and redeemer. Jonah invites us to spend less time telling people what God wants them to do and more time showing them what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. Jonah invites us to stop being a “praise-God-we’re-not-like-those-sinners” people and to become a “praise-God-we’ve-got-a-merciful-and-forgiving-God” people.

Jonah invites us to move into the world that God envisions: where forgiveness and mercy outweigh vengeance and justice; where sin, evil, violence and injustice are defeated not with tanks, unmanned drones and bombs, but through the cross of Jesus Christ. Jonah invites us to be content in the great mystery of a God who changes his mind. Jesus went about everywhere doing good. Yes, he spoke about God’s justice and warned extensively of the coming judgment. But before, during and after he spoke of these things, he was always merciful: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hos 6.6a, cited by Jesus in Matt 9.13).

There’s an entire world out there: lost, hurting and alone. Without spending any less time using our brains and our mouths, let us spend more time using our hearts and our hands. For, as the great British hymnist Frederick William Faber writes:

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner,
And more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior;
There is healing in His blood.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man’s mind;

9. Thanks to Dr. Joshua Graves, preaching/teaching minister for the Otter Creek Church of Christ in Nashville, TN, for sharing this quotation with me; <http://www.joshuagraves.com/2012/06/12/parking-spaces-and-god-and-us/> (accessed October 30, 2012).

And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
We should take Him at His word;
And our life would be thanksgiving
For the goodness of the Lord.

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