

File: Jonah Transformation Text: Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-3,10; 4:1-11

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from god our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen!

This is the time of year when you hear a lot about transformation. After the Holidays there are a lot of ads for health clubs, gym memberships, exercise equipment, Seattle Sutton, Weight Watchers and other food programs. This is their time of the year. Transforming one's health is always a good idea. On February 14th Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and it's also about transformation. As we dwell more deeply on the need for a deeper walk with God.

But typically when Christians talk about transformation it's often about asking God to improve some part of life which we'd like to improve. Like, Lord help me transform my finances this year, help me transform my marriage or another relationship in life or Lord help transform my parenting or my health. These are all good things to have transformed and we throw them all under the umbrella of faith.

What if real transformation went way deeper and took us to a place where we moved beyond those things. To a place where God transforms us in ways we might not expect or ways we might not even initially want. To a place where

despite all of the things that might not be right in our life we are still able to put ultimate trust in God? Well, that kind of transformation is possible.

As I was preparing for this morning it became clear to me that my prayer for you and me is that we might receive some clarity from the Lord in either a small or big way about how the Lord might be leading us to be transformed for the long haul. Our readings this morning are from Jonah and while Jonah is most famous for being swallowed by the whale--looking at the transformations that occur might give us insight into ways God might be desiring to transform us.

Here's the story of Jonah in a nutshell. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it because it was a wicked city. Jonah's response to God's was to run away from God. He was so adamant about running from God that he got in a boat and fled as far as possible in the opposite direction.

While on the boat a big storm comes up and the captain and sailors pray to their gods to save them and nothing happens. They ask Jonah why it's happening and Jonah confesses that he's running away from God and tells them the only way to save themselves is to throw him overboard, which they do and bam he's swallowed by the whale. And what do you know, once he's off the boat, the storm calms down and the ship and crew are safe.

Here's the first transformation that takes place. Recognizing the God of Jonah as The Lord God almighty, the crew worships and offers sacrifices to God. They are changed—transformed from non-believers into people who know and worship the one true God.

Transformation sometimes happens that way. We think all is good and we're pretty self-sufficient and on top of life for the most part and then **BAM**---we face a situation that causes great fear that we can't control and we cry out to God and things work out for the best and we proclaim God is Good and we thank the Lord for answered prayers. And sometimes we are transformed because it gives us a strengthened faith in God to face the next situation. But it's also true that sadly sometimes transformation for the long haul never really happens because we just go back to the way we were, thinking we can keep God in our pocket only for the times we need him.

So the boats crew is transformed while Jonah's in the belly of the whale. Of course Jonah's praying big time while he's in the belly for three days (I mean who wouldn't). Then the Whale pukes him out on the beach and God comes to Jonah a second time and tells him to go to Ninevah. And Jonah says OK----smart man. But he's still reluctant. And here's the second transformation in Jonah. At first he's defiant towards God and heads the opposite direction on the boat, now even though he's reluctant he's obedient and goes to Ninevah.

And that is a real moment of growth for Jonah and possibly you and me. Jonah chooses obedience even though he's inclined not to. One thing many parents tell their children over and over is something like this "though it may not always be easy, just do the right thing". We all face choices every day about what's the easy thing to do and what's the right thing to do because they aren't always the same. And it can be a hard choice.

When it comes to following God the expedient thing may not always be the obedient thing. But in the long run if we trust that God's plans are best then there is a transformation that occurs when we are obedient to God. Jonah was obedient despite his reluctance. I'm confident you and I can identify times in our lives when we know God is calling us to obedience but it doesn't always fit into our plans. Whose plan do we choose, ours or Gods?

The Third transformation in Jonah occurs when he goes to Nineveh, it's a huge city. The Bible says 120,000 people. Jonah walks through the city for three days preaching God's call to repentance and the whole city is transformed. The Bible says "The Ninevites believed God". They become, like the sailors, followers of the one true God. Again an incredible story of transformation as people respond to God's call to repentance. In 3:10 it says "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."

Let me read for you from chapter 4 Read 4:1-3. God used his obedience to save the Ninevites, but Jonah was angry at God. You'd think Jonah would be thrilled that God spared 120,000 people. Instead in his heart Jonah didn't want God to forgive them; he wanted God to wipe them out because they were enemies of Jonah's people. The story ends as one author said "with Jonah bitter because God has shown towards Jonah's enemies the very mercy and steadfast love that characterizes God." It's as if Jonah said, I knew it all along, these people who don't deserve a shred of forgiveness and mercy, if I go there you might just forgive them God and I'm angry about that.

Perhaps God was so persistent in calling Jonah because even though he was transformed into being obedient which is a good start---God wanted to transform his heart. Maybe God hoped that as Jonah walked around Nineveh, he would see the individual faces of people he hated, people he didn't think deserved mercy and maybe he would look into their eyes and faces and see them as real people, as individuals not just as one big group he considered an "enemy".

So there you have it—Jonah is a story of transformation. The transformation of the hearts of the sailors and the 120,000 Ninevites. The transformation of the defiant Jonah to an obedient Jonah. We don't know if Jonah's heart was ever transformed though at the end of the book God has a pretty blunt conversation with

him trying to bring him to his senses—but God did use his obedience even if his heart wasn't there yet to transform the sailors and Ninevites.

We can talk about faith, we can add a lot of Biblical knowledge and both of those are great and I'm an advocate for both. But frankly a person can spend a lifetime (Maybe even having sat in church our entire life) dancing around the real question of will we allow God to transform us both in obedience and in heart. Whether the transformation is momentary or occurs over time isn't really the issue. The issue is are we really open to transformation by God? Sometimes all we really want is for God to confirm everything we think and the way we act, because we want to assume God necessarily holds our values and sees people the way we see them. First of all that's not real transformation and secondly we see from Jonah that's not always the case because God saw the Ninevites very differently than Jonah saw them.

Real transformation occurs when we're willing to be honest about our real agenda and be open to God's. Real transformation might even be a little scary because it might mean putting more of God at the center of our life and less of us. It might mean rejoicing that God forgives people you don't want God to forgive. Transformation might be scary when we honestly examine our real beliefs next to our stated beliefs or are honest with what we're really filling our minds with.

Transformation might be a little scary when we take a step of obedience even when it's not expedient.

And if all of this makes real transformation sound a little scary, well it can be. But scary in a good and joyful kind of way. Because it can mean letting go of some of our agendas and taking on God's agenda. It can mean being proactive in life in a way that honors God in all we do not just little pieces here and there when it's convenient. It can mean knowing deep down in the recesses of your soul that God is on your side even when the world and others seem not to be. It can mean knowing deep down, not just with a few words that you are indeed a beloved child of God. My prayer for you and me is that somehow someday God will reveal to you this morning one part of life where he is leading you to be transformed and may you be open to hearing and acting on that.

LET US PRAY:

