
The Freedom of God

Jonah 3:1-5,10

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, January 21, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Coming off the heels of Duke's weeklong commemoration of the life and legacy of Dr. King, I've been re-reading some of Dr. King's speeches and sermons because if we were to only know King through the popular public imagination of the United States, we may think that King's only speech was "I Have a Dream." But there's so much more than his dream, so much more to his rhetorical substance, his life, ministry, and activism. There's his March 1968 sermon, his last Sunday morning sermon, which he gave on Passion Sunday at the Washington National Cathedral. It was titled, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." Today, people talk about "staying woke" but King was a forerunner for thinking about staying awake. He realized that we could fall asleep and miss out on God's movement in the world. In this particular sermon, he talks about Washington Irving's story of "Rip Van Winkle." Rip Van Winkle slept for 20 years after he went up a mountain. When he went up the mountain, a sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down the mountain 20 years later, the same sign had a picture of George Washington, the first President of the United States. Rip didn't know who George Washington was and what Dr. King points out is that Rip doesn't merely sleep for 20 years but he sleeps through a revolution. He says that "one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses—that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution."

We may not be in a revolution and thus sleep through a revolution like Rip Van Winkle, but we may be sleeping through a time of change. My concern is that we have been sleeping through so many changes while holding on to doing church for a 1980 society in a 2018 world. As the world changes, we may miss the move of God happening in the world because we are asleep and stuck in a mental, theological, social rut. No desire to change and seeing no need to change. And there is nothing wrong with tradition unless it becomes traditionalism. According to the esteemed Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition." Are we awake to change? Are we willing to change? Or, are we sleeping, even when God makes a change?

God changed God's mind about Nineveh and "about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." God took a different, surprising turn. Nineveh turned away from their evil and God turned away from his fierce anger toward them. "God changed his mind." God changed his perspective on them. I didn't say that God changed who God was in God's very being and character but that God changed his mind, which in itself is a part of God's unchanging nature—that is, that God can change his mind. God is not static or paralyzed but responsive. This was a big deal because Nineveh was a "great city" and was a symbol of the ruthless Assyrian empire. It was called a "city of blood" (Nah 3:1). They were the king of cruelty, the perceived sewage of society, and when God initially tells Jonah to go and cry out against it, this is why he refuses and goes to

Tarshish—he hates Nineveh. Hate can get in the way of God’s call. But just because we hate something or someone doesn’t mean God does. If God likes everything we like and detests everything we detest, it’s probably not God we are following, but ourselves. If God doesn’t ever act in ways that surprises us, maybe the God we have is made in our own image. If God is always predictable, it may not be God you are worshipping, but your own wishes and whims. God doesn’t always agree with us.

God changed his mind, like it or not, Jonah! God is free to do whatever God wants to do. God can love whomever God wants. God doesn’t need our affirmation to be God. God changes his mind and takes a turn that Jonah, the religious holy person, doesn’t like at all. He’s upset because God doesn’t act in the way he wants God to act. God doesn’t hate who or what he hates. He realizes, in other words, that he isn’t God. He learns that God is free to be God and will not be controlled by us. Jonah is so displeased at God’s mercy that became angry. He tells God, “That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” He was so unwilling to change his views about Nineveh that he goes on to say, “And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” That’s how deep hate can be (angry enough to die). Are we willing to change our minds like God? If we’ve never changed our minds about anything or anyone during our entire life, perhaps we haven’t grown in our faith like God wants us to grow. To be created in the image of God who changes his mind means that we will change our minds at times.

God is willing to change his mind toward a punishable people, which should gladden our hearts, but Jonah doesn’t care because so often we don’t care like God cares. We don’t love like God loves. Rather, we judge, we despise, we otherize the Ninevites of our day. They are not our people, our race, our class, our country club, our political affiliation, so we just don’t care. We’d rather die than see God shower grace on them, for God to treat them like God treats us, because they don’t fit our imagination of who is in and who is out of God’s embrace of love. Nasty Nineveh? They don’t fit our biblical interpretations or our theologies or our worldviews or our denominational histories. They just don’t fit, so we aren’t willing to change anything about our thinking or be open to changing our minds or hearts, especially about them. We don’t want to turn away from what we’ve known to be true, even if it’s false. We like it the way it is and that’s it and we don’t mind hanging out in a great fish for three days if it comes to that. We just want the so-called wicked to get what’s coming to them.

We may not like Nineveh but what we really can’t stand so often is the unlimited mercy of God—for those liberals? for those conservatives? This is what made Jonah angry and what makes us angry. We don’t own grace so it’s not up to us to dole it out. God will love, forgive, and cherish whomever God wants. God’s freedom makes us uncomfortable just like the Gospel should make us uncomfortable at times. It’s not always about comfort; sometimes we will be disturbed. And the way God treats Nineveh disturbs Jonah and the way God treats our enemies disturbs us. But God is free. We may want to edit out or ignore who God really is and destroy those we despise, but “God [isn’t our] lap dog, called upon to affirm the narrow things we already believe” (John Holbert). God is God and God changed his mind. We should start following the real God, not our imaginative or safe one, but the real One, the One unlike us, the One gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is so different from us. God is free, free enough to change his mind.

The lack of human willingness to change (our minds) in any way reveals that we are the ones bound. We actually aren't free. We're locked into our own way, more rigid than righteous, more rigid than believing in real redemption. Not open to new attitudes or new mental responses to new situations. If we are children of God that means we should change our minds, too, at times, finding a way to forgive the Ninevites in our midst. We should not want them to fail but want them to experience the freedom of God discovered through forgiveness and mercy and love. Why is it that God is so much more flexible than us?

It doesn't have to be that way because in God's freedom, we are free as well, free to plead, to repent, to turn, to choose, to change, to love. We are not robots. The Ninevites changed. Jonah didn't change his mind and chose to be full of anger all the way to the end, yet God still didn't obliterate him either. Not even our choices, good or bad, can stop God from loving us. In God, there is always freedom, the freedom to change or not. Not to change at any point in your life suggests that you are in bondage. But God doesn't coerce us to be free though God wants us to be.

God wants you to be free enough to be awake to the changes of God and how God wants you to change your mind, to change from anger to joy, from hate to love. God wants you to be free enough to lavish love even on your enemies. Loving your enemies is an obvious sign that you are free in God's freedom. Jonah struggled with this and many of you probably struggle with this too, but you aren't fully free until that is the case, until we can say like God does, "should I not be concerned about Nineveh...? Our freedom will make us concerned with those least on our minds and furthest away from our hearts. This change of mind and heart could be the very thing needed to save someone else; the very people we may despise may be the ones God wants to save. Jesus said, "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:44), Jonah. That's when we know we are really free—when we love our enemies. But so many of us are bound. Love your enemies. Love the Republican, love the Democrat, love the Independent, love the liberal, love the conservative, love the immigrant, love the native, love the police officer, love the prisoner, love the Northerner, love the Southerner. Love your enemies. Love Nineveh.

God changed his mind about Nineveh. God changed his mind about you. Let's hope that you can change your mind too.