

## **“Changing Minds”**

*Robert Montgomery*

*3rd Sunday of Epiphany-January 22, 2012*

*First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN*

### **FIRST READING: Jonah 3:1-5,10**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nin'evah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nin'evah, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nin'evah was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nin'evah shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nin'evah believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

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.

### **SECOND READING: Mark 1:14-20**

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zeb'edee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zeb'edee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

I am not sure what kind of week each of you has had this past week, but I suspect that yours was harder than mine.

As you may know, Brock, Marv and I traveled to Haiti last Sunday and spent the week in the area around Cap-Haitien in the northern part of the country.

“Going on a mission trip” tends to sound like you are going to be doing heavy lifting for God, but I think it is time to be honest right here in church and admit that the mission trips that I have gone on have actually been more like celebrity vacations. Yes, we do go down there with good intentions of doing something good for other people, but we are always, always outmatched by the generosity and hospitality of the people who host us. These trips can be dangerous. You can eat yourself to death, if you are not careful.

This trip to Haiti was no different. We were met at the airport by Pastor Moïse Laurin and by Mr. Dieulin Joanis, who then chauffeured us to Pastor Laurin's house, where we met his wife, Junie. And together Moïse and Junie showered us with food, hospitality, comfort and welcome. We ate their food, took over their best rooms, and Moïse and Dieulin used their vehicles to take us to 7 different sites that need a clean water system and to 1 where a system had recently been installed.

The area around Cap-Haitien did not take direct damage from the 2010 earthquake that devastated so much of the southern part of the country, including Port-au-Prince, the capital.

What has happened in Cap-Haitien is that refugees from the south have made their way north to Le Cap in very large numbers, much as people moved to Houston after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. But there is no escaping the impact of the earthquake in a country the size of Haiti. And the earthquake has both sapped the lifeblood of the country, as well as spreading diseases like cholera across the whole nation.

Clean water is not just an added convenience or assurance. It is essential for life. So, we saw why we were there, very, very clearly, and so did our Haitian hosts and all the people we met. There is a thirst for clean water, literally, in Haiti.

Now, if I tell you even more truth, I have to tell you that I had no burning need to go to Haiti myself. Mostly, I wound up there because Brock and Marv just wouldn't let it go, when after our last installation in

Guatemala, we were having trouble finding a site for the next install. In faith, we had purchased our next system—the one you see in Nall Hall—assuming it would go somewhere in Guatemala.

Meanwhile, Marv went to “solar school” as a part of the work of “Solar Under the Sun,” an organizational child of “Living Waters for the World,” where Brock, Teresa and I got our training in clean water systems. And at “solar school,” there was an urgent appeal for teams to come to Haiti.

We were open to that idea, but we weren’t necessarily begging for the chance to go, either. And for a while, we weren’t so sure that we were supposed to go, because our attempts to reach the Solar Under the Sun contacts for Haiti kept coming back empty—or actually not coming back at all, as it were.

But then in a single week, really a single day, we got word back from Haiti that, yes, indeed we would be more than welcome, and that there was a site, no, wait, 2 sites, no, wait, 5 sites, no, 6 sites interested in water systems. The number finally grew to 9 by the time the week was out, and we just barely touched a tiny area of Haiti the SW side of Cap-Haitien.

Then in the same week, virtually that same day, a donor came to us and presented funds to buy a second system. And with that, we knew we at least had to go and see what we could do.

And that is how Brock and Marv and I wound up at the Cap-Haitien airport, not knowing a soul in the whole country, but simply looking for someone holding up a little “LWW” sign, who turned out to be Pastor Moïse Laurin. Who is himself a great soul for God and in whom God has poured out a deep river of love for people.

So, that is also how I wound up bouncing around in the back of a pickup truck on the rough roads of Haiti, being shaken in my bones at times, but being stirred in my thinking about how it is that, despite my awareness of Haiti through my classes in history and geography, somehow we human beings have a really hard time realizing that places and people like those of Haiti really do exist—until we go there ourselves. And then it becomes dazzlingly obvious that they do, to the point you wonder how it could not have been obvious before the pickup truck ride and the Holy Spirit wake you up to the fact. After all, the Haiti earthquake has been in the news for 2 years. We were there almost on the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the quake.

And so, yet once again, I see the trouble that God has in changing minds. And above all, the trouble in changing mind.

I have known about the earthquake for 2 years. I have known about Haiti for decades. But not until the unlikely, unexpected call of God comes to us do we realize, “oh, you mean, go there? Oh, so..., these people are actually real human beings, not just words on the page of my mental textbooks?”

This is a problem I have had for years, unfortunately, seeing people as real. As real people. As real human beings, just like me.

I am not alone in that, though.

I know this, because when Emma and I made plans to move to Chicago soon after we married, people we knew began to treat us as if we had been given a death sentence. They came to us as if they would never see us again. Chicago wasn’t a city of people—it was a “big city.”

And one definition of being a Southerner, I suspect, is that we have no use for big cities.

We are like Jonah. Maybe all Jonah had to hear was, “Go to Nineveh, that great city...” and Jonah was booking his flight with Travelocity, Kayak and Orbitz, and he didn’t care about the reward points. He just didn’t want anything to do with some place as big and as seemingly bad as Nineveh.

We know how that turned out for Jonah. And what got Jonah the most riled up, in fact, once he went to “that great city” was that it was full of human beings. And what’s more, human beings who listened. And what’s most of all, they listened and then changed their minds and then their lives.

Oh my. Who could be prepared for that much real interaction with real, live human beings? Not me, I don’t think. I have reached—or fallen—to the point that I fear that no one can change anyone’s mind any more for any reason. Including mine. We are all dead set on what we know. We don’t trust anyone to tell us anything different from what we already know.

So, after all is said and done, and after Jonah takes a boat ride, a quick dip in the Mediterranean, and then takes the first submarine ride we know about, and after his clothes have dried out and he has met the real human beings who lived in Nineveh, we reach the end of the story and discover that it was easier for God to change the minds of a whole city of Assyrians and for God to change God’s own mind, than it is for God to change Jonah’s mind.

And with that, I fear I am sitting right there in the dumps with Jonah. And I have to listen to what God says to Jonah,

“And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Haiti is made up of 8 million people living in a country the size of Maryland. You are rarely alone in Haiti.

At one time, Haiti was fought over by the most powerful nations on the planet, not because anyone wanted the people, but because it was considered the most fertile land in the New World, land able to produce sugar and bananas and coffee.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of slaves were brought there as captives and forced labor.

People whose names we do not now know...but whom God loved and still loves.

Even as God knows your name and mine, and loves each of us.

The deepest religious experiences of my life have come in realizing how wide and how deep and how far-reaching and personal the love of God is for people—for me, of course, but as I have hopefully matured as a human being and as a Christian, I realize ever more clearly how deep that love is for all the people of the world.

I tended to think of Haiti as a place, a block of land, a nameless, faceless crowd of “people.” But not people with names and faces in my mind—until I met just a few of the very real human beings who are there.

Just as Chicago didn’t remain just a “big city,” where a little Southern couple would be lost and swallowed up by the impersonal masses—but became names like John and Annette, Lew, Rob, David, Thomas, and Ron...” Real people lived in Chicago. Who knew?

Bosnia is no longer that place where some strange, un-human beings live and constantly start wars because they are not like me and my country. No, now Bosnia is the list of people and faces I know there—real people, just like you and me.

It is the same everywhere I go, every time I encounter another “foreign” group of people, no matter what I think separates them from me, whether it is oceans, language, skin color, history, economic status, gender, religion, whatever.

The big discovery of life is that God loves human beings and seeks to save every last one of us from our own inhuman schemes. And God wants us to make that same discovery everywhere we go, no matter who we meet.

And so now Haiti is no longer “Haiti, that vaguely familiar country somewhere near Cuba, maybe.” Now Haiti is Moïse, Junie, Pere Noe, Dieulin, Marc, Michel...and a country full of persons, who do not know their left from their right...a country full of children!

I don’t know why it takes us as human beings so long to recognize our own humanity, and the humanity of the creatures who share our own nature, our own DNA, our own flesh and blood.

I don’t know why it is so hard for us as people to change our minds about God, and about others and even about our own lives, especially in relationship to God and to others.

But I know there is a lot of Jonah in me.

When Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John, they are people who I think had precious little interest in anything other than fish.

“Fish” is what they knew.

“Fish” is what they wanted.

“Fish” is all they were looking for.

No one who fishes can turn down even the vaguest hint of “where the fish are.” Fishing stores are full of equipment and lures and boats all with one purpose: go find those fish!

So, when Jesus shows up on land, I suspect that those fisherman really didn’t notice. Nothing on land really interested them. Their eyes were on the water, on the possible sighting of fish.

But this voice, not from the water, but from the land—the exact opposite of where they had been looking—did something unusual.

This person who had never seen them, looked at them and called them—took note of them. Called them as persons.

And he wanted them—people with names! Peter, James, John, Andrew! And he spoke to them and threw a net to draw them in—to personally invite and call them.

“Follow me,” Jesus says to them.

But then he says something really strangely interesting,

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for...people.”

Fish for people?

What can that mean? It can only mean that you start to train your eyes and your ears, your senses and your instincts all toward seeing the people all around you as...people! As persons. As people created in God's own image.

If you take me out to a lake or a river or even the deep, blue ocean and catch a fish, I'll likely nod and smile, but inside I am yawning. I am just not interested in fish.

I can barely tell a crappie from a barracuda.

But I can tell you most breeds of sheep.

What God is most interested in, however—who can imagine?—is every single person on this planet.

And God knows them all, knows us all, knows you and knows me, by name, by voice, by sight, by heart and by thought, by everything about us.

Because God is out to seek and to save, to rescue and to deliver, to change hearts and minds, to change lives—all for the better.

Because God loves people. God seeks people. God has mercy on people.

“And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

God even cares about all the animals of Haiti and of the world, because God is the God of life. The birds, the fish, the animals of the world, which we barely notice any more—God knows each one of them, too.

And God is out to change all our minds about what life is all about, and what matters and what we should our eyes and ears and hearts open to see.

It is God's creatures, that's what. And especially the creatures we probably least want to see, namely, our fellow human beings around the world, regardless of who they are, where they are, what language they speak or what their story has been.

Countries are not just crowds of nameless masses to God. The earth is not a plastic globe God keeps on a shelf and occasionally updates with new names of places.

No, this world and the people, the living creatures of this world, are on God's heart and mind. God's eye is on us, in hope, and God's ear is open to every breath and sigh and prayer of each one of us.

Moïse and Junie and Dieulin and Marc and Noe and Maurice were all as real as any of us, long before I met them and became aware of them.

They did not have to become real to me to be real to God.

But thanks be to God, God keeps working to wake us up to the reality of God's presence and God's struggle for justice and righteousness, for grace and for mercy and for salvation.

God keeps working to change all our minds toward the thoughts that come from the mind and heart of God.

And thanks be to God, that work, along with all our neighbors on this little planet, are very real to God.

And the salvation of God, the love of God and the love God puts in our hearts for God and for one another, all that is also real.

Yes. When it finally dawns on us, and our minds change and we see people...as God sees people...and we are looking for people because God is looking for people...

Yes. Thanks be to God.

Amen.