

“The God of Second Chances”

Jonah 3:1-10

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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A number of weeks ago now, when we were still in our 2 worship service schedule on Sunday mornings, I mentioned the South Carolina native, Stephen Colbert, in a sermon. It was a story about his family, and in describing his family during the 9a sermon, I accidentally confused his wife’s name for his daughter’s name.

A couple of you listening to the sermon caught this, and very graciously let me know after worship that I had misidentified who was who in Stephen Colbert’s family.

I was a bit embarrassed.

I thought I had double-checked everything.

So...I went into my office, and I made the change in the sermon text.

And at 11:15a, I got the family names correct, and no one at 11:15a knew that I had made this slightly embarrassing mistake at 9a. I even made a point to let our AV Coordinator know that the sermon he needed to post for that Sunday was the 11:15a sermon, not the 9a sermon.

It wasn’t a big deal, but to a number 1 on the Enneagram,  
someone who likes to get everything right the first time,  
it was good to get a second chance.

Have you ever received a second chance?

Of course you have.

All of us, at different times, have needed another chance.

I recall reading, not too long ago, the story of Pat Day.

Pat Day is a born-again Christian, a retired professional jockey. When Pat Day retired, he had made more money in professional horse racing than anyone else in the history of the sport.

Day grew up in a Christian home, but he says he “took that upbringing for granted.”

So when he got into horseracing,  
he would party at night, race in the day,  
party at night, race in the day—

The partying went from alcohol to cocaine...  
he was an addict, but he kept on winning.

Then one night in a hotel room, he turned on the tv.  
A televangelist was doing his show.

“Because I felt that I was a Christian, I didn’t think what he had to offer was what I was looking for,” Day recalled. “I certainly wasn’t going to sit and listen to some Bible-thumper preacher.”

So Day fell asleep.

When he woke up, he had the distinct feeling that he was no longer alone in his room.

“I couldn’t see anything, but I felt a definite presence there with me.”

So Day turned the television back on, and the televangelist was still going...in fact, he was having an alter call.

Day writes: “I realized in that instant that the presence in that room with me was the spirit of the Living God...I fell on my knees and wept and cried...[and from that moment on, Jesus] broke the chains of bondage to drugs and alcohol.”<sup>1</sup>

Now true confession.

I have, in the past, poked fun at televangelists.

When I think of televangelists, the words “astute theological mind” do NOT immediately come to my mind.

But when I read today’s text,

I thought—why am I creating hierarchies?

Why am I being a THEOLOGICAL SNOB,

when it comes to second chances?

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You see, our text for today is about second chances.

It begins like this:

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time...”

In other words, it’s a second chance for Jonah.

Jonah, who ran from God’s call back in chapter 1, now gets another chance to make things right, to do his job, to go to Nineveh and give them a warning from God.

But of course, it’s not just a second chance for Jonah.

It’s also a second chance for the Ninevites.

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Harder They Fall: Celebrities Tell Their Real-Life Stories of Addiction and Recovery*, edited by Gary Stromberg and Jane Merrill, Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2005, and reprinted in *Finding God: A Treasury of Conversion Stories*, edited by John M. Mulder, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

And Jonah doesn't want them to get a second chance.  
Why?

Because they were enemy people.  
Babylonian people.  
They were the same people who took Jonah's people into exile.

But Jonah goes to them this second time around, to bring the word of the Lord to them, and what do the Ninevites do when they hear Jonah?

They repent!  
They make good use of their second chance!

And the last verse of our text for today reads:

*“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.”*

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Now—if we pause and think about it,  
my hunch is that all of us can relate to Jonah...  
I mean, we all have moments where we think:  
this person does not deserve a second chance!

Have you ever thought that way before?

It's the parable of the prodigal son, right?  
The parable ends with the elder son in the field,  
refusing to go into the party...why?

Because he does not believe his younger, delinquent, ne-er do well brother deserves a second chance.

Maybe it's happened in your family.

And there's someone in your family who has never been responsible, who has always caused problems, and you were the responsible one, but this family member just cannot seem to get their act together.

And this family member is always getting chance, after chance, after chance...and it causes tension between you and this family member, all those chances...

Have you ever asked yourself, or said to yourself:  
does this person really deserve another chance?

Heck, just a moment ago, I did it.  
I SECRETLY did it.  
You didn't know I was doing it.

But when I mentioned the televangelist that Pat Day saw, I didn't tell you who it was.

Why?  
Because it was Jimmy Swaggart.  
And I thought to myself—with all that guy has done,  
I don't want to mention his name in a sermon!

Does Jimmy Swaggart really deserve chance after chance  
after chance?

How in the world could God work through HIM to change someone else's life, the way God changed Pat Day's life?

It's easy to think like Jonah.

It's easy to find ourselves asking: does this person deserve another chance?

But let me pause right here...there are moments, times along the way when that is a good question, a necessary question to ask.

For example, when there's abuse in a relationship—the abuse needs to stop! And that may mean, for that relationship, there needs to be a parting, a separation, and that there is no second chance.

So at times, the question of whether someone deserves a second chance is the right question.

But it's not the only question.

There's another question that we always ought to ask, and I think is a very important question, and it can be found in Jonah, chapter 3.

It's a question that comes not from Jonah, but from the King of Nineveh. Do you remember the question that the King of Nineveh asks in chapter 3?

### **Who knows?**

Despite all the evil that he and his people have done, who knows?

*“God may relent and change his mind,”* says the King of Nineveh.  
*“...he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”*

In other words....

### **Who knows what God will do?**

That's the question that the King of Nineveh asks, and I believe it is one of the most beautiful questions in the entire Bible:

### **Who knows what God will do?**

What if you and I made those six words part of the bedrock of our faith each day:

Who knows what God will do with our past, with your pain,  
with whatever problem you're facing right now?

Who knows what God will do if we reach out to a person with whom we have conflict, and try to mend some fence?

Who knows what God will do...  
if I finally go seek help  
for my addiction, or my grief, or my debt?

Who knows what God will do?

That's not just a question for the Kings of Nineveh in this world.  
I submit it's a question for good and faithful Presbyterians.

At the heart of the gospel is the good news that not only do all of us need chance after chance, but that is what God gives us every day in Jesus Christ.

What if this day that God has given us right now—  
is in fact OUR second chance...  
or maybe our 3<sup>rd</sup> chance, or our 300<sup>th</sup> chance—  
to do that which we have been hesitant to do:  
to take a risk with our faith,  
to go forward in spite of our fear,  
to take a chance with God's love...

**Who knows what God will do?**

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The late Walter Rauschenbusch is probably best known for his seminal work *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. It's a book that has influenced thousands upon thousands of Christians through the years.

Walter Rauschenbusch taught at Colgate Rochester Seminary in New York where he gathered many admirers and many harsh critics for his insistence that the way to God was NOT so much personal piety, but striving for equity in the social order.

Edwin Dahlberg was a student at the seminary and signed up for Rauschenbusch's class.

Dahlberg later recalled:

“I was in class one day,  
the morning following the bond issue election in Rochester.

“Dr. Rauschenbusch had given [so much] for this bond issue that would bring sewage treatment and fresh water to the largest poor section of the city.

“The bond issue came before voters. The next morning, Dr. Rauschenbusch came into class. He had the newspaper under his arm. He opened up his lecture notes. He looked again at the paper and held it up to the class:

‘BOND ISSUE DEFEATED’.

“He started the lecture,” Dahlberg relates, “but then he put his head over on the desk” ...and he began to cry.<sup>2</sup>

Now...what neither Dr. Rauschenbusch nor Edwin Dalberg could have known that day, is what God would do...

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story.



Dr. Rauschenbusch, you see, may not have won fresh water for the poor in the city. But years later, another young student at a different seminary would get his hands on a copy *Christianity and the Social Crisis*.

And that book would become one of the formative books that would shape that student's faith.

The name of that student was Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Rauschenbusch—when he felt defeated that day in class—he had no way to know how his writings would help shape the mind of someone who, half a century later, would become one of the greatest leaders for social change and equal justice and racial harmony that this country has ever known.

### **Who knows what God will do?**

None of us can know ahead of time, what God will do with our failures, or our faltering steps toward faith...

Have you ever read anything by the poet Christian Wiman?

In one of his essays, Wiman describes what it was like when, shortly after he was married, he received the news on his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday that he was sick.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr and the Word that Moved America (Updated Edition)*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

“It took a bit of time...and a series of wretched tests to get the specific diagnosis...I have an incurable cancer in my blood. The disease is as rare as it is mysterious, killing some people quickly and sparing others for decades.”

Wiman describes how, in the days following his diagnosis, he and his wife were already grieving the loss of “the life we had imagined with each other.”

*Then one morning we found ourselves going to church.*

*That first service was excruciating, in that it seemed to tear all wounds wide open, and it was profoundly comforting, in that it seemed to offer the only possible balm...*

Christian Wiman had not been to church in 20 years.  
But now he goes.

*I go to church on Sundays, not to dispel...doubt but to expand its energy, because faith is not a state of mind but an action in the world, a movement toward the world. How charged this one hour of the week is for me, and how I cherish it...<sup>4</sup>*

Christian Wiman wrote those words some 16 years ago.  
He is still alive today.  
He teaches at Yale, and he writes poetry.

And I keep thinking about the visit he had to that church right after his diagnosis.

It changed his life.

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Wiman, “Love Bade Me Welcome,” found at [Reckonings: a journal of justice, hope and history: Christian Wiman, "Love Bade Me Welcome"](#).

What if there's someone in this sanctuary right now, facing something similar?

An unexpected diagnosis.

Or it's their first visit to church in 20 years.

You may think on any given Sunday, oh, what difference will it make if I go to worship today—what difference does it make whether I serve as an usher, or volunteer for Vacation Bible School?

You may think it makes no difference, but I submit that you can make THE difference.

Because what if God is gearing up right now to work God's grace through you, and all God needs you to do is be present and open and willing?

What if your welcome and hospitality toward someone, your word of encouragement or just your silent support for someone, not only brings them back to Westminster...but opens an avenue for the love of God to be at work?

### **Who knows what God will do?**

How many of you are looking forward to the donuts after worship?

Let me make a suggestion.

Don't just search for the donuts.

Search for someone you do not know, haven't met before, and say hello to them, because it might be that person's first visit to church in 20 years, and your words of welcome could make the difference.

Or the next time you receive an email or a text or a phone call from a brother or sister in Christ here at your church, and the person contacting you is...

asking you to help with Children's Church,  
or to serve dinner or serve as adult sponsor for our youth,  
or to teach a Sunday School class,  
or be a part of the next Men of Westminster event...

At that moment, you might be tempted to say, ah, I can't do it. Besides, there's 2000 members here at Westminster. Someone else will pick up the slack.

You might be tempted to say all that, but please don't. You see, I've got a different answer for you. Say yes.

Say yes, because who knows—it may be the grace of God ready to do something with your life, giving you a chance to make THE difference in someone else's life...

**Say yes, because who knows what God will do through you...**

Amen.