

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
27 July 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

***“This is Us: Changed by Life Experience  
This is Good News: Our Change Impacts Change in Others”***

Sixth Sermon in the Summer Series: *This is Us: Seeing Ourselves in Scripture...Reflecting Good News in our Lives*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

***Jonah 2:10; 3:1-10***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

After running from a call by God / After boarding a ship, enduring stormy seas and being thrown overboard / After being swallowed by a big fish and spending three “come to Jesus” nights in self-reflection and prayer / Jonah is vomited up by the fish onto dry land.

Jonah has been *through it*. And—Jonah is a changed man. Not all experiences change us so dramatically. But this one did. Jonah gets a second chance to go and do the thing that God had asked him to do in the first place: preach repentance to the Ninevites. Sounds easy enough to our modern-day ears; how bad could be the Ninevites be?

Well...

I know we’re in week three of our Jonah series, but we haven’t talked much about Nineveh yet.

And we need to. Because we cannot understand Jonah’s change and then Nineveh’s change without a bit of context.

Nineveh was a huge city in the Assyrian Empire, had long been an enemy of Judah and Israel. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel, destroying its capital, Samaria. Twenty years later, in 701 B.C., the Assyrians nearly conquered Jerusalem, the capital of Judah.

We learn from the prophet Nahum in our Bible, just how prideful Nineveh was. Its pride came from its wealth and power. One account reveals, “The wall around Nineveh was 40 to 50 feet high. It extended for 4 kilometers along the Tigris River and for 13 kilometers around the inner city. The city wall had 15 main gates... Each of the gates was guarded by stone bull statues. Both inside and outside the walls, the

King created [what we might call modern day] parks, a botanical garden, and a zoo. He built a water-system containing the oldest aqueduct in history.”<sup>1</sup> Sounds lovely. Until you learn how Nineveh came into its wealth.

As the Prophet Nahum reveals the Ninevites were greedy—plundering surrounding lands—grabbing property and people. They were known for their brutal, violent torture of those they captured. Their hallmark forms of torture? Amputating hands and feet. Gouging out eyes. Skinning and impaling their captives. And, top it off, they continually lied<sup>2</sup> about their brutality, saying it wasn’t that bad (essentially gaslighting the people who said it was).

The prophecy of Naham ends with these words about the Nineveh and its King:

*“Nothing can heal you;  
your wound is fatal.  
All who hear the news about you  
clap their hands at your fall,  
for who has not felt*

<sup>1</sup> Research from several places, one of them being: <https://www.gotquestions.org/God-judge-Nineveh.html> (4 January 2022), accessed on July 27, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “The situation is worsening by the hour. Doctors Without Borders said Thursday that the rates of severe malnutrition in children under five in its clinics have tripled in the last two weeks alone.

*your endless cruelty?”*  
(Nahum 3:19)

Perhaps you understand now why Jonah, a prophet of Israel, ran in the Opposite Direction of Nineveh to board a ship to go to Tarshish, which was 2,500 miles away. He did not want to be the next headline in Nineveh’s news.

I have spent this week imagine who Jonah might be today in our world, and who Nineveh might be. There are no shortage of possibilities.

But let’s imagine Jonah as Dr. Mohammad Saqer—a Palestinian doctor in Gaza—who on Thursday of this week, fainted from hunger himself while working to save the lives of children who are dying from hunger.<sup>3</sup>

In an interview this week, Dr. Saqer said the ward treating malnourished children where he works in Gaza is full of babies that are so skinny, they no longer look human; so limp, their noodle-like limbs can no

The entire population of Gaza’s 2.1 million people are now food insecure, without reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious and healthy food, the UN said this week. According to Gaza’s health ministry, 900,000 children are going hungry, and 70,000 already show signs of malnutrition.” (see footnote 4 for reference)

longer move; their lungs so weak they can no longer cry. The situation in Gaza is now “*beyond what the human mind can grasp,*”<sup>4</sup> he said. Amid the carnage and suffering, the doctors have only each other to turn to. “*We try to encourage each other, reminding one another that this profession is rooted in humanity, and under no circumstances can we abandon our duty or the oath we took,*” Dr. Saqer said, even as they wonder if their own children are still living.

A doctor was treating a little girl this week who developed dangerous potassium deficiency because of hunger. The doctor said, “*I noticed [the girl] was listening to our conversation and she asked her mother how to prevent potassium deficiency. The girl’s mother said eating potatoes and bananas would help to boost the girl’s potassium levels—neither of which is available in Gaza.*”

“*The girl then asked her mother if there were bananas in paradise and she answered yes. The girl said, ‘then let’s [just die] so I can eat bananas and get better.’*”

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<sup>4</sup> Ivana Kottasová, Kareem Khadder, Mohammad Al Sawalhi, Eyad Kourdi, Abeer Salman and Ibrahim Dahman, “‘The weak treating the weak’: Doctors in Gaza are fainting while trying to save their

“*Can you imagine a child wishing for death just to get food?*” the doctor asked?<sup>5</sup>

I imagine Jonah as Dr. Mohammad Saqer, seeing his people die in his arms, and being called by God to go to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to preach a message of repentance to him. Can you imagine the fear this doctor as he approaches this leader show hates his people so much that he intentionally keeps food and water away from children as they die and then lies to the rest of the world saying it’s not that bad? Can you imagine Dr. Saqer making his way through armed Israeli checkpoints—walking with courage with whatever energy he has left, stumbling step by step—crying out and saying, “*Change your ways; 40 days and Israel will be overthrown! Stop killing my people; this is not the way of God!*”

Then can you imagine Netanyahu relenting and repenting, allowing aid into Gaza, repairing its roads and structures? Saying “*I’m sorry*

starving patients,” *CNN World* (25 July 2025), accessed on July 27, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Kottasová, *ibid.*

*for all that I have done, for all that has been lost”?*

You see the relentlessness of Assyria’s violence against Israel back then—the ransacking of their holy places and the plundering of their people and possessions, is not unlike the images we see on the news right now Israel’s attacks on Gaza. In our minds today, Jonah could be a Palestinian prophet. But here he is, in the pages of our Bible, a prophet of Israel. (The sad, ironic cycle of history.) And yet *this* story in Jonah is ultimately about the protection and preservation of the people of God who are suffering and dying, but not just them! The story is about the protection and preservation of those who are causing the suffering too! The oppressors! It’s absurd, right?

Sometimes I think we read this story and think Jonah is just some wishy-washy prophet who was running away from God’s call to go somewhere Jonah didn’t want to go because he preferred beaches over mountains, rural areas over urban, group missions over solo endeavors.

But no, Jonah ran the other way when he was first called by God to Nineveh because he was

terrified. Jonah was a wounded, traumatized person whose people were being persecuted, and whose country was under threat. And he was called to go to the very leader who was initiating and orchestrating that persecution and give That Guy a chance to change his ways and repent.

So for Jonah to change his mind and decide, in fact, to go preach in Nineveh was a HUGE deal. This was not just a change in plans, this was a change of *heart*. And as we saw last week, I believe this is because in the belly of the fish, Jonah was held by God, heard by God, healed by God—and I think that’s what allowed him to find the courage to go to Nineveh with this second chance he was given.

Jonah was spat up on shore, not just with a second chance at life, but with a new understanding of what God’s mercy and love could do in his life, and therefore—*if God says so???*—in his enemies’ lives too.

So Jonah goes to Nineveh, and he could really use a break at this point, and guess what, he catches one! He preaches an 8-word sermon (*“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overhrown!”*)—and his sermon

works! On the first try! The people of Nineveh proclaim a fast, and everyone—great and small—put on sackcloth, which was a physical or external sign of spiritual or internal fasting and transformation.

This is every preacher's dream, right? To get 8 words in and be like, "*Well that's a wrap! I can see y'all have heard me and changed!*" That never happens!<sup>6</sup>

What I love about this passage is that there is this pocket of people in Nineveh who are the first ones to change. It's not everyone and it's not the leader, but it's a pocket of people who seem hungry and ready for change. I feel like this is often the case with cruel leaders. Not everyone who lives under a cruel King or President or Prime Minister endorses or believes in what the leader is doing. Who knows how long these Ninevites have been hungry for compassion and change, the permission or inspiration to be a different way than how they are being now?

You see, it's not *Jonah's* words that make the King put on sackcloth and repent; it's *his own people's* actions. It's a

contagion effect. Jonah's life is affected in the belly of the fish. He is changed. He goes to preach to Nineveh, and the people of Nineveh in one part of the city are changed. The people of Nineveh's changed attitudes affect the King of Nineveh and he is changed. And then he makes a proclamation to the entire city of Nineveh—humans and animals—and *everyone* begins fasting as a sign of repentance for their evil ways.

And isn't this how change and transformation works? When something in our thinking or perspective shifts and we begin living in alignment with that new found value or perspective, then we ourselves are truly changed and our actions then effect and impact change in others. People see us. They notice the difference. They wonder about it, perhaps ask about it. They try it out for themselves. And the contagion of change continues. This contagion of change can happen in good ways and bad ways, but this third chapter in Jonah is about the good ways it happens. It's a powerful story about the positive impact of positive change. Which gives me hope—

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<sup>6</sup> And by the way, we preachers are always, also, preaching to ourselves, so we include

ourselves in the ones who take a LONG time to change!

especially as we live in the world that we do.

And the story concludes with the King of Nineveh wondering, “*Who knows? God may relent and change God’s mind; God may turn from God’s fierce anger, so that we do not perish.*” And then the narrator tells us immediately—with no dramatic suspense, with not even a commercial break in between—“*When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God’s mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them and God didn’t do it.*”

The Hebrew word defined as “relent” or “turned” is **sub** which means *changed action*: turn back, repair, reverse, revoke. The Hebrew word defined as “changed mind” here is **naham** which means a changed heart: to be sorry, console, to be moved, to have compassion or have pity.<sup>7</sup>

Both of these words are different than the Greek word for “repent” that we see Jesus use in the gospels: *metanoia*. That is about the changing of

one’s mind or perspective. The changed mind usually leads to a changed course of action, but that is not implied by the word *metanoia* itself. *Metanoia* is really a thinking word.

*Sub*, in Hebrew is really a doing word, changing what one is doing. In this case, the Ninevites stop torturing and start praying and putting on sackcloth.

And the word *Nahum* in Hebrew is a heart or feeling word. Moved to having compassion or the softening of one’s heart or feeling toward another.

All three are important. They speak to our three centers of intelligence.

But what’s interesting in Jonah’s story is that the verse that is translated as “God changed God’s mind” has caused all kinds of controversy through the years because traditional doctrine will say that God is immutable, or unchangeable and can’t change God’s mind or that God is omniscient and ‘knows all.’

But it’s here that I’ll remind you, again, that the Bible is

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<sup>7</sup> Strong’s definitions referenced at [https://www.blueletterbible.org/kiv/jon/3/9/s\\_892009](https://www.blueletterbible.org/kiv/jon/3/9/s_892009) on July 27, 2025.

written by humans who are trying to make sense of their lives in relationship to God. In our limited, dualistic, human experience, in our human brains—“bad guys” are punished; they do not get mercy or grace. So in order for “bad guys” to receive mercy or grace, then God must have “changed God’s mind” or “softened God’s heart” or “changed the actions of calamity” that God was going to bring upon these evil people, because surely God would definitely be ready and willing to punish people who do such bad things, right? That is how we humans think. So that is how we humans write the Bible.

From our perspective. We make God think like we like to think. Which is convenient. But it's not always great theologically or ethically.

Which is not to say that Scripture not divinely inspired, because if you think about it, the reason the Bible is relatable is because it's written by humans who think like we think, and so therefore know how to make God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness feel all the more real to us!

Now, does God actually change God's mind? Well, I don't think of God so anthropomorphically

as to think God has a mind as I have a mind, so I really don't know. But there are whole schools of theology that explore this idea. One is called “process theology,” which essentially espouses that God knows all possible outcomes and scenarios in the world, but because God gave us free will, God does not what outcome or scenario will happen until humans act in that situation, and then once we act, a whole new set of scenarios and possibilities come into play—and God is kind of living with humanity in a relational sort of way—always knowing all the possible things that could happen in our life, but never knowing what we are going to choose because we have free will. That's a super simplified version of a complex topic, but just know there is an option between “*God knows everything*” and “*God knows nothing.*” (See how fun theology is?!) )

What's most important and interesting to me in Jonah is how this story explores the nature of God's grace, mercy, and love which is for all people—but all the characters in this story: Jonah, the men on the boat at sea, and the King of Nineveh and the Ninevites—think of God's love, mercy,

forgiveness, and grace as something that is conditional. And the story is about shattering that belief through and through.

All the characters in this story are ascribing God's agency to their actions or the circumstances or situations action, but what if our choices and agency matter more than we think and what if we are capable of more than we give ourselves credit for? What if calamity did not come on the city of Nineveh right then because the city of Nineveh stopped wreaking calamity on their surrounding countries? It follows that if their behavior changed, the consequences of their behavior on surrounding countries would change too. Maybe it was one of their enemies that was going to ransack them in 40 days and that didn't happen because they put on sackcloth and repented? What if the ransacking wasn't from God but from those they had harmed?

People are capable of transformation. We see Germans today and do not think of Germans as Nazis. People can and do change. Countries can change. Individuals and whole people groups can change.

This should give us hope. And I believe if God is inspiring that change it's not because God is changing God's mind about how badly to punish us (or not punish us) but rather God is helping us see how change is possible and encouraging us and calling us to change ourselves and live from our full humanity and belovedness and to see others in the same way with the same dignity and worth. God wants us to believe in ourselves and trust that and our own hearts and lives and actions actually do change others. Little things we do can disrupt the system of violence, oppression, and hate.

If we stop attacking people, people may stop attacking us. If we start giving people adequate drinking water and food and healthcare and allow them to live freely and creatively, then those people may actually live freely and creatively, and not feel like they have to steal or resort to violence just to feed their families and survive.

This third week of Jonah may be one of my favorite weeks in our whole summer series of *Seeing Ourselves in Scripture* because it really focuses on the positive side of our humanity: *This is Us*: We do actually allow ourselves to be changed by our

life experiences. *And this is Good News:* When we are changed, our changed hearts/minds/perspectives impact and inspire change in others.

This happens in big ways and small. When I broke my neck in college, it did change some pretty major things in terms of the trajectory of my life—changing from a pre-med major to a religion/philosophy major, for one. It also made me grateful for my mobility and forever changed the way I view being able to move and walk around.

But it also changed me in a way that impacted change in other people's lives, almost immediately...but I didn't even know my actions were making the impact they were or creating the contagion of change they were.

When I was well enough to come back to college after my recovery, I had this desire to go and sit and talk with people who were lying in bed all day and couldn't get up or out and about. I just had empathy for them. So I went through training and became a hospice volunteer. Because the only people I knew at the time who couldn't walk around were those who were

dying. So here I was, a freshman in college, and I was traveling around visiting folks who were dying and confined to their beds, not because I knew what it was like to be dying, but because I knew what it was like to be lying in bed all day. I allowed the experience of breaking my neck and lying in bed all day, impact me in a way that moved me toward compassion for others lying in bed all day. That change in my heart, created a change in my actions. I took time to go through hospice volunteer training, which meant time away from my friends and classes and other college activities, and then once trained, I took time on afternoons and weekends when I wasn't in class to drive around and visit folks who were lying in bed all day.

My action of visiting them often allowed their caregiver to get out and go to the grocery store or to go catch a movie with a friend. It brought conversation and companionship to the person dying and also a bit of relief and a break to the caregiver. More than I realized at the time, it also brought the families hope, as they were inspired by the fact that a college kid would even care about their lives or situation.

And who actually did something about the empathy they felt. What's more, it made them think even more about what they could do. I got a letter from a couple caregivers a few years after college who shared that they were impressed that I could do what I did so young, and after their loved ones died, they thought maybe they could do something to for other caregivers. So they created a care givers support group/system for Grayson County. It helped them use the gifts and skills they learned as caregivers while also provide hope to others.

Now I didn't choose to break my neck, but a lot of the things that happened after than were choices I made because I allowed myself to be changed by that experience. I allowed myself to feel empathy. I took a risk to try something new and use a skill I had (knowledge of laying in bed), and my visiting of others dying and lying in bed, inspired a whole different skill set in others – caregiver support groups. Who knew! God creates contagions of change in all kinds of ways!

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<sup>8</sup> I got this story from an interview on Hidden Brain between Shankar Vedantam and philosophy professor philosopher Laurie Ann Paul, who studies how our life experiences inform and transform who we are.

I know YOU have a story like this in your life too. Something happened. Probably something you didn't ask for or want. But it woke you up to a new perspective or reality and you started doing something differently in your life. Or you started speaking differently. Or showing up differently. And people noticed. Maybe they asked you about it, maybe they didn't. But in noticing what had changed in you, they found the courage to change something in themselves or make a change in their life that impacted others. And so it goes.

Here's another inspiring story about the contagion of change from history.<sup>9</sup> And it's kind of Jonah-esque at parts!

In the middle of the 18th century, there was a young man named John Newton in England. He was seen as a difficult child.

His mother died when he was very young. And this made him feel very unhappy and very alone, especially when his father remarried and basically sidelined John.

His mother was religious, but after she died, John soon found himself not just turning away

<sup>9</sup> Hidden Brain Staff, "The Moments that Change Us," *Hidden Brain Podcast* (24 March 2025), accessed on July 27, 2025 at <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-moments-that-change-us/>.

from religion, but turning against it. He became what you might call a militant atheist.

His father wasn't a support either. His father was distant and unemotional and was focused heavily on self-discipline. So perhaps this was his father's way of supporting him. But John did not find it helpful. In fact, it alienated him both from his father and from other people. And his character also then started to deteriorate. He behaved badly, he was arrested, he was rebellious, he was publicly flogged. And he also importantly, had this kind of experience of despair where he blamed others and wasn't able to kind of take responsibility for who he was and how he was behaving.

But then at one point in his life, he is recruited (or press ganged...or pressed into service) to join the Royal Navy...but he wasn't obviously interested in hard work, and he wasn't a model seaman.

The Navy ships will exchange one set of seaman for another, and this is what was happening to John. He clearly wasn't behaving well and he wasn't a very appealing member of the crew, so he got swapped into a slave ship, and this was formative for him because he finds himself working in the slave trade, and even here, he ends up making lots of enemies among the other men working on the slave ship. He was just not a very pleasant person to

be around...then he also had started to have serious health problems. This added a certain kind of difficulty to his life.

At one point, John Newton gets left on the coast of Africa, and even the slave ship that he was on basically abandons him. He goes through various experiences and adventures, but eventually finds himself back on a ship bound for England. This is called the Greyhound. But far from being grateful to his rescuers, he spends his days on the ship cursing and drinking, and at one point even falls into the ocean and has to be rescued again by them.

So he's rescued, but he hasn't repented. Even though he had a difficult time in Africa, he was badly treated, got himself into trouble. And in general, he sort of just went back to his old ways. And even this kind of near miss didn't seem to have a significant effect on him.

On March 10, 1748, John Newton woke up in the night to find the ship was caught in a terrible storm. (sound familiar?)

Now, he happened to have with him a devotional text called *The Imitation of Christ*, and he had been reading it. And this is before the storm, so this was something that he had been reading as he was traveling. And then in the middle of the storm, right, he suddenly had the realization that not only was his life in danger and the life of the entire crew was

in danger, it was this incredibly intense situation, but he realized that if there was a God, he could expect no mercy.

So he realized, at the heart of this incredibly frightening situation in a small, wooden boat being tossed around the sea with incredibly huge waves towering over it, looking like, knowing that at any moment, death could come. And then, at *that* moment, you realize that you're in a position of vulnerability, and someone with religious faith would then look to God as a protector.

John realized both in that moment that he truly was vulnerable, but given his past life and his past way of being, that even in this moment of vulnerability, he didn't deserve the kind of mercy that God would provide.

*[Side note: Notice how these kind of life changes always seem to happen when we are in a vulnerable position...when we are not in control of something and realize something needs to change in us?]*

The story goes that he and the captain of the ship had been plugging a hole, and this was after they had plugged many holes. But when they plugged this one, at one point he says, if this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us. And of course, at that point, he starts to reflect on the fact that he has, you know, railed against God for these many years. And what mercy could a sinner like him

actually expect?

So he's having a realization of two things: 1) wait, I'm in trouble and also, 2) for the first time, he's comprehending what vulnerability requires. In this particular context, he was able, maybe for the first time, to realize what real vulnerability implied, and also what the promise of being saved from that entailed. In other words, he was able to kind of see the appeal of religious belief, maybe for the first time.

The ship survives the storm, but an important element of that survival came from Newton, because he took the helm for many hours and for most of a day, and used this time, apparently, as he was basically attempting to have the ship respond to the waves and dealing with all the problems of the storm, to also reflect on his situation and who he was and what he was doing, what he had done, his past immorality, his past behavior, the way that he had isolated himself from other people, and really had a bit of an existential crisis. As the storm subsided, he, also kind of emotionally collapsed.

So the battered ship arrives in Ireland, and only hours before a second major storm strikes, and in some ways convinces John Newton that God, in fact, answers prayers. And for the first time in many years, he visited a church and began to pray.

So after experiencing this intense

vulnerability, and in the midst of that, recognizing the power of being saved and understanding what that really meant and how, in a moment of great openness, you can be saved and recognizing that is, in some sense, as the appeal of Christ. So he interprets this as a moment of insight, that he was allowed to then return to land and survive.

And the ship gets back just before a second huge storm. So he feels like there was a sequence where he experienced a kind of openness and a recognition of the divine kind of power and grace of God. He prays in response. God grants him then the opportunity to survive by getting him to land in time. After that, basically, he starts going to church and kind of performing devotional services.

So in 1772, this was a little more than two decades after that storm at sea, John Newton writes a hymn to describe his own transformation, *Amazing Grace*.

*amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

*T'was grace that taught my heart to fear,  
and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear,  
the hour I first believed...*

But the story doesn't stop there. Newton has his own personal spiritual transformation but there is a second transformation

that is communal and liberation focused.

John Newton's had spent some time in the slave trade working on these slave ships. He knew how vulnerable those enslaved people were, and he connected with their vulnerability.

He has a discovery of both how one can be deeply vulnerable and how protection from the horrors of a problematic and violent world is so important. He had participated in the slave trade, and he participated in some of the atrocities. And so he had a direct understanding of the kinds of individual and societal cruelties that were being imposed on people that were being enslaved. And to understand how terrible it is to be in a vulnerable position, one has to have experienced that.

...But when he learned to think about himself and understand himself as a vulnerable person who needed saving, what he discovered when he discovered redemption and being saved himself from a watery grave was his capacity to understand that there might be other people who could also be vulnerable and needed saving.

And so began his passionate path to becoming an abolitionist. To effecting change in other people's lives. His path was lighted by his ability to discover his own redemption and to find connection with other people through that.

At one point, he writes a pamphlet titled *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, and it's a graphic account of what happens on these slave ships and includes a confession of his own involvement in the slave trade. The pamphlet sells out. The second edition goes to every member of parliament. He ends up having a significant effect on the slave trade across the British Empire.

He realizes how badly he had behaved and what he did was draw from his own personal experience, both what he did as a slave trader and what he saw as a slave trader, others doing, and recognized that he needed to confess. He needed to confess to his own sins and also describe the sins of others. And he was able to demonstrate through implicating himself in the truthfulness of his account, and also the cruelty and outrageousness of what was being done. And people believed him! (Because he was a white man telling the truth of these horrors.)

Newton was able—through the pamphlet—to bring home in a particular way the outrages that were being perpetrated and to show the immoral nature of the practice. And this made a significant contribution to the political movement to abolish slavery in England.

John Newton went from being a man who loved to stir up trouble

to a minister who tended to other troublemakers. He went from profiting off the slave trade to an outspoken opponent of it. He died nine months after the slave trade was abolished across the British Empire.<sup>10</sup>

Change can happen in smaller and everyday wells as well. One action can have effects far beyond what we would ever anticipate.

Change can happen through a handshake. In the 1980s, AIDS arrived on the world stage. It was a new, frightening disease with no cure and was rampaging through communities and countries. People believed that you could catch AIDS from touching someone who had it, or even sitting on the same toilet seat. Sufferers were shunned, and up to 50% of people polled in the United States believed that those with AIDS should be quarantined. Of course, many people with AIDS were gay men and so this misinformation and shunning disproportionately created more hate and ostracization of the gay community.

On April 19th, 1987, Princess Diana, one of the most famous people in the world, opened the

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<sup>10</sup> All from the transcript of the podcast mentioned in Footnote 9.

first unit in the UK dedicated to treating people with HIV and AIDS. During her visit, she shook the hands of nine AIDS patients without wearing gloves, one after the other after the other. Her action changed people's perceptions of the disease forever.<sup>11</sup>

In August 2018 a 15-year-old girl named Greta Thunberg sat outside Swedish Parliament—skipping school every day—demanding urgent action on the climate crisis in the three weeks leading up to the Swedish election. She was tired of society's unwillingness to see the climate crisis for what it is: a crisis. Now, Thunberg's name is synonymous with climate activism and awareness, her movement has led to 10 million people taking the streets worldwide to demand action on climate change.<sup>12</sup>

Decades earlier, in 1955, another 15 year old girl—Claudette Colvin—was taking the bus home from high school when she sat in the bus section that was reserved for white people. The bus driver ordered her to give up her seat, but she

refused. She emphatically stated that she paid her bus fare and had a constitutional right to sit wherever she wanted. Police officers were called, and Colvin was put in handcuffs and arrested.

Colvin's heroic stand was motivated by some of the history lessons she learned in school saying, "*It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me pushing me down. I couldn't get up.*"

Nine months later, a similar act was orchestrated. Rosa Parks would do the same thing—refuse to get up from her seat on the bus. Parks became the face of the bus boycott movement, and the bus boycott really became the thing that put a young Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the map.

But Colvin's story and impact didn't end just by inspiring Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. She would go on to legally challenge the Montgomery bus segregation laws. She was named a plaintiff, along with

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<sup>11</sup> Roffey Park, "7 of the Most Inspiring Leadership Stories," *Roffey Park Institute*, accessed on July 27, 2025 at <https://www.roffeypark.com/articles/7-of-the-most-inspiring-leadership-stories/>. Also watch video of Princess Diana shaking hands here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU0SPrCTwsY>  
<sup>12</sup> Information from Thunberg's organization:  
<https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/who-we-are/>

four other women, in a lawsuit filed in district court, *Browder v. Gayle*. This court case ultimately made its way up to the Supreme Court, which held that bus segregation laws were unconstitutional. It was a major win for civil rights!

Ultimately, Parks was chosen over Colvin to be the face of the Montgomery bus boycott for reasons related to image. But we Colvin wants us to remember that Park's act was not a random act of defiance against a racist system, as it is historically presented now. Rosa Park's act was pre-planned since Colvin would be viewed unsympathetically as a pregnant teen and Park's image would be more well respected as an already a known NAACP leader. But make no mistake, Claudette Colvin's courage was the one to start the contagion of change on buses...and Rosa Parks continued it on...and all who participated in that boycott that then led to change for all black Americans and all of us Americans who seek to live in a society unburdened by the dehumanizing sins of racism.<sup>13</sup>

Claudette Colvin never became a household name. But her actions reverberate throughout history.

Jonah's story reminds us that when we are changed, our change can also inspire and impact change in others. And The World Can Change: person by person, boycott by boycott, handshake by handshake, testimony by testimony, bedside chat by bedside chat, repentant city by repentant city.

When we have courage, like Jonah, not to view our enemies as unworthy of salvation, but rather as ones deserving of God's love, mercy, and grace—just as we are—our belief and compassion for those persons can actually change them. Does it always happen that way? No. But sometimes it does. And we'll never know if THIS is the time when our choice will make a difference unless we go ahead and take the risk and make the choice. Extend the olive branch. Say I'm sorry. Talk to the person we fear. Do the thing we are afraid of.

And just because you make such a choice one day, doesn't mean

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Tremoglie, "Black history's heroes: Claudette Colvin — the original Rosa Parks," *Washington Examiner* (17 Feb. 2022), accessed on July 27, 2025 at

<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/119615/b-lack-historys-heroes-claudette-colvin-the-original-rosa-parks/>.

you'll do it again the next. Stay tuned for next week and how Jonah actually deals with the reality of Nineveh repenting. Spoiler alert: it's not great.

But regardless of how he feels about what happened, the effect of his actions remain. Nineveh is changed because Jonah was changed in the belly of the fish and decided to let his change affect his next choice.

As singer, artist, and peace advocate Joan Baez said to the UN in 2023, "*Action is the antidote to despair.*"<sup>14</sup>

If you are here today it's because somehow God is at work in your life and you have been changed...in big ways and small. God has inspired change in you. How are you inspiring and impacting change in others?

I know you are. I know that in your life you have pivotal points you can look back on and say, "*I was changed in that moment,*" and I know there are ways you can reflect and see how that change in you, ended up inspiring change in others.

Everyday your actions have consequences. And many days,

those consequences are changing the world...for the better!

It may be as simple (or as revolutionary) as shaking a hand, taking a seat on some steps, refusing to get up from sitting down, or maybe even enrolling in hospice volunteer training. Every change matters. Every change creates the opportunity for a second chance.

You do not need to worry about whether or not your action or message actually changes another. That part is not in your control. But what you can control is whether you speak up or show up or sit down or stand up or shake a hand or speak love, truth, justice, and hope.

Imagine.

You have been tossed at sea and thrown overboard by life or a poor choice or by someone else's actions or by who knows what.

You have been in the metaphorical "belly of the fish" for a while—a safe place where God can hold you, hear you, and heal you—preparing you for what is to come.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/audio/2023/07/1138347>

Then you are spat up onto the “new shore” of your life as it is NOW (which is different than what it was before the ‘tossed at sea’ experience). You have a second chance in hand. This is your “Now What” Moment.

The question is simple: what do you? How will your changed heart and mind create change and inspire change in our others and in our world?

An 8-word sermon worked for Jonah and the Ninevites, so it doesn’t take much.

Don’t sell yourself short!

Amen.