

**Sermon, Faith Mennonite Church**  
**February 22, 2015**  
**Phil Stoltzfus**

**“I Changed My Mind”**  
**Genesis 6:6-7, 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15**  
(First Sunday of Lent: “Upside down and inside out”)

A screaming headline on CNN’s website early last week said it all: [“Religion’s week from hell.”](#) From Chapel Hill, NC, to a lonely beach in Libya, to Baghdad, to northern Nigeria, to a café in Copenhagen, we’ve seen a wave of religion-fueled, and anti-religion-fueled, violence. With casualties mounting, human suffering increasing, Congress mulling over a new war powers resolution, and voices of fear from various quarters growing more shrill, we are left asking, What happened to our world? Where did we go wrong? And what can we do to escape from these seemingly endless cycles of hurt?

These are precisely the questions we’re struggling with in our passage today from Genesis. This good creation of the Lord has fallen, become corrupt, is “filled with violence.” God is sorry, regretful—  
anxious to make a shift in direction: “I will blot out all life,” I will destroy everything, I will hit the cosmic reset button.

Then in one of the most disturbing moments in the bible, a genocidal plague of death is indiscriminately unleashed, ethnically cleansing the entire planet. Michelangelo captured the horror of God’s terrorism right on the Sistine Chapel ceiling by depicting the view from *outside* the ark—men, women, and children in a frantic struggle to save themselves and one another from the rising waters. In the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* the god Enlil, on a whim, destroys the earth by flood because humans are too noisy and have disturbed his sleep! But after the flood, the goddess Ishtar, reproaching the senselessness of Enlil, vows to remember the survivors, Utnapishtim and his family, symbolizing a new relationship through the jewels of her necklace spread across the sky.

Our biblical story plays out very similarly, with the added twist that here there is only one God, so any shifts in direction have to be attributed to a change in mind of God’s self. God’s initial decree to destroy *all* earth’s creatures is not followed. Noah and his family and the other animals are spared—  
enough to completely regenerate the earth again. God then establishes the first covenant—with humankind and the entire ecosystem—symbolized by the bow in the sky. This same God who initiated the Flood now makes an unconditional promise to us to be an ever-renewing source of life, salvation, and love—forever.

And yet, what a remarkably bizarre series of changes of mind it took to get to this covenant. Not only among the humans in the story, but also in the way they understood and pictured their one God acting—in differing ways in response to shifting events. And that is our theme for Lent this year. Those times in our journey as a people, in our life of discipleship, when we’re turned upside down and inside out. When everything changes. Those times when God says, “*I* changed my mind.”

It’s a little odd, isn’t it, to think about God being sorry, repenting, regretting, or “changing?” A few chapters later God barter with Abraham, eventually being convinced to spare some of the inhabitants of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-33). Then in Exodus, after some pleading by Moses, God “changes his mind,” sparing the Israelites from total destruction (Exodus 32:14). Jonah is downright disappointed when God “changes his mind” (Jonah 3:10) and decides to spare Nineveh after promising that it would be overthrown. Isaiah announces that God is doing a “new thing” (Isaiah 43:19) by proclaiming God’s

reign of peace (Isaiah 52:7), while Jeremiah points toward a “new covenant” between God and people (Jeremiah 31:31-34) —yet another way of reconfiguring things beyond the earlier covenants with Noah, Moses, and David.

It can be a little unsettling for us to imagine a God who appears to be so radically upending things periodically. It would be much easier and more convenient to reach for those passages which say “Thou changeth not” (Malachi 3:6), “there is no shadow of turning with thee” (James 1:17), thou art “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). When it comes to issues of God’s character in relation to us—of God’s reliability in maintaining the covenant, then of course virtues of authenticity, faithfulness, and steadfastness are key. We value these comforting and trusting qualities in our spiritual partner. God will always be there for you, God’s mercy and grace are unending, God will keep God’s promise.

Now look what happened to this beautiful idea in the history of Christian thought. In the medieval period we cleverly constructed a whole supposedly rational apparatus of so-called attributes of God—God is eternal, infinite, all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere present, impassible (that is, incapable of suffering or feeling pain). And connected to that of course, is the doctrine that God is immutable, or unchanging. One of the unfortunate byproducts of this European sophistry is that God became a cold, unfeeling, unresponsive, impossibly distant mathematical principle of the One.

Perhaps this made sense for some of the ancient Greek philosophers in their context—fine. But I don’t believe that its re-surfacing in Christian theology has served the church as well as advertised. In fact, I think it distorts faith. Why? It turns “I changed my mind” into a *negative* trait rather than a *positive* one—a positive spiritual truth, discipline, and way of picturing God that can do three things: 1) respond better to our everyday experience, 2) encourage us to have healthier relationships, and 3) point us toward the story of Jesus.

First, changing our minds is a normal, necessary part of everyday experience. I have a receipt here for something that I exchanged after Christmas. I wonder if any of you did that, too? My receipt here includes a description of the reason it was returned: “Customer Changed Mind.” Now I ask you, is that something bad? Is there something morally deficient about returning something within the time frame of the return policy? No, of course there isn’t! In fact, companies *want* you to return things that are defective or that you are dissatisfied with—they want you to have a positive experience so that you will remain a loyal customer. They even give you a reward for coming back—either a refund or a shiny new copy that is the right color or size. So why do we celebrate this in our everyday transactions, but then we say, “Oh no no no, God, we’re not going to allow you to do that!” It doesn’t make any sense.

But let’s go a little deeper. Second, changing our minds is a necessary part of a healthy relationship. Imagine a relationship you have with a significant other—a family member, a life partner, a friend. Now imagine that person acting according to the doctrine of immutability. What would you call such a person, who is always right, always knows everything, always is in control, never needs to be affected, or adjust to, or be changed by the feelings of or shifting life circumstances of anyone else, a person whose mind must never, by definition, be allowed to change? We have words to describe individuals like that: stubborn, unfeeling, lacking listening skills, closed off, lacking empathy, and of course, “psychopathic”—defined as: “a personality manifesting itself in antisocial behavior, lack of ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships, extreme egocentricity, and a failure to learn from experience.” I don’t know about you, but that’s not the kind of partner I want, and it’s not the kind of God I pray to. We need mutual healing in our relational images at both at the human-to-human level, as well as the human-to-God level. Both of these could together benefit from a dynamic, mature view of the ongoing way *our minds can and do change* for the better.

Third, an appreciation for “I changed my mind” can come to us not only by analogy to human experience and relationships, but by attention to the gospel narrative itself. There’s no better example than today’s passage from Mark. It follows a pattern strikingly similar to the Noah story. First, we have the creation of an exciting new movement of baptism in which one prominent recruit, Jesus, has the powerful experience of being named God’s child. Wow! But then, Jesus is *driven* by the Spirit—was there some struggle involved?—into a place of wild animals, temptation, and thirst. John himself, the leader, is arrested by Herod and, later, cruelly beheaded. The flood waters are rising.

But then, in the last two verses, the radical change—Jesus proclaims the good news that the reign of God is near at hand. Not merely a movement of inner repentance, renewal, and cleansing—No, it will also manifest itself in the world as a new communal and social reality. The one who brings the good news of peace will also bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). *This* is the new covenant, the new promise.

During this traditional Lenten time of preparation for the baptism of new Christians, we’re reminded of how this baptism/temptation/announcement-of-the-Kingdom story in Mark prefigures later shifts central to the gospel message—the triumphal entry, the trauma of Good Friday, the triumph of Easter. In this larger drama of the cross, we are confronted with, finally, the promise of a fundamental shift in the course of human history. Our salvation, our security, no longer needs to be based upon violence, upon the guarantee of security through force of arms or the force of threat in our interpersonal and political relationships. Rather, the redemption of creation now draws its life at this pivotal moment from the nonviolent story of Jesus, from the one who compassionately took on the risk of the world’s suffering in order to challenge, transform, and sustain it.

We worship one God, who interacts with us through the twists and turns of Flood, Lent, and Passion. This same God walks with us, opening up new, unexpected, and surprising ways of being alive and dynamically active in history even in the face of hurt. *Jesus, the nonviolent revolutionary* turns things upside down and inside out. *Jesus, the nonviolent revolutionary* signals this change in God’s mind, changing the world. And this, then, sisters and brothers, is our answer to “religion’s week from hell.” We are the witnesses to a religious worldview in which the Beloved Community of justice and peace is at hand, is springing forth, because it is rooted in the very Spirit of the living, changing God whom we worship, and the very living, transforming Messiah whom we follow. Amen.