

Minister: Pray with me. God, we think of your nature as unchanging and unchangeable. Yet message after message, Bible story after Bible story, tells of You changing and rocking people's boats as you rocked Jonah's, so they will change, as Jonah did.

Perhaps our desire for your Word to never change merely reflects our own need to be secure in our present moment. Change can be hard for us all. Like Mr and Mrs Jonah, we tend to think about our own little world, and what will be best for us, while you, God, see all the world, all the world's people, indeed, all of creation. You consider what will be best for us all, as we change and as our world changes.

You call us to broaden our vision. You call us to see as You see. Your call to a reluctant Jonah levers him to perform your mission, just as Jesus' call to the disciples levers them out of their boats to perform his mission to be fishers of women and men. May your call lever us from our comfort, and change us into servants of your mission, in this time and in this place. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Jonah: Well, didn't I say this is an unbelievable story?
Not just what the Ninevites do, but what God does-- and doesn't-- do!
The Ninevites listen to God's decision, spoken through my little prophecy.
Then they change. They put on sack cloth, from the oldest to the... *youngest*,
from the greatest to... *least*, from commoner to... *king*.
Even their cattle put on sack cloth!

Mrs Jonah: Their cattle?! Now I've heard everything!

Jonah: I said you would not... *believe me*. But it is true. The entire city sits in remorse
and repentance for their sins.

Mrs Jonah: But God told you that in forty days Nineveh would be destroyed.
That is like a promise! Are you saying that God has a change of mind?
That is unnerving. I want to trust God will do what is promised,
not surprise us with a change of mind!

Jonah: (*Heaving a heavy sigh he says*) Well, that is what I thought, too.
But God sees the Ninevites repent, and God responds. God relents.
God repents, too. God repents of all that anger.

Mrs Jonah: What a new thought. Maybe not such a bad thing though, to repent and show
mercy; even God repents and shows mercy. Now, that is a lesson for us all.

Jonah: Yes, my love, it is. That is the nature of God. God persists.

Mrs Jonah: God will chase us to the ends of the earth.

Jonah: God changes.

Mrs Jonah: God changes. You thought the Ninevites were beyond the pale of God's
forgiveness and mercy. Yet, God's mind changes. God repents and relents.
There is no sin so great, that God's mercy and love cannot overcome it.

Jonah: God is universal. God's love extends to, not just a select few, God's love
extends to all -- from oldest to youngest, from the greatest to least, from
commoner to king.

Mrs Jonah: Now, that IS a lesson for us all.

(*Players: freeze for a slow count of five. Then sit.*)

I am in the belly of that fish for three days! And then, it delivers me, like a parcel, onto Nineveh's shores.

Mrs Jonah: Now that is a whale of a tale!

Jonah: Didn't I say you wouldn't... *believe me?* But it is true, wife. I live to tell the tale.

Mrs Jonah: And then, Mr Jonah?

Jonah: God's word comes to me a second time.

Mrs Jonah: Well, no surprise there. Isn't the priest always going on about God's persistence? That's the nature of God! God does not let us go. You, Jonah, may want to hide and let God go, but God will not let you go!

Jonah: God will not let me go. So I end up in Nineveh, that city of heathens and unbelievers. Why am I there? Normally I would say, 'I do not know.' But God tells me to go, so there I am.

Mrs Jonah: What do you prophesy to the Ninevites?

Jonah: I do not say much. The Ninevites are such despicable people. They worship another god. The women wear different clothes. The women cover their faces.

Mrs Jonah: We sometimes do that...

Jonah: The men kneel on their mats to say their prayers.

Mrs Jonah: You men sometimes kneel at prayer...

Jonah: I cannot stand their foreign customs. I proclaim, 'In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown!'

Mrs Jonah: You don't give them much of an explanation as to why they should repent. So... That's all you say?!

Jonah: Uh huh!

Mrs Jonah: Well, I guess that is the end of Nineveh. (*Long pause of silence*). Well, that is the end of Nineveh, isn't it?

Jonah: That's just it. It was NOT the end of Nineveh.

Mrs Jonah: Your prophecy did not come true? You said God had spoken.

Jonah: I went to Joppa and caught a Greek boat to Tarshish.

Mrs Jonah: Oh, I get it. Nineveh is east and Tarshish is west. You went west to run and hide from God. (*slight pause and then ask*)... Did that work?

Jonah: (*Said slowly*) Well... I thought it would work. It turns out you can run, but you cannot... *hide*.

Mrs Jonah: No big surprise there! God knew all along where you were, Jonah. That's the nature of God! So, what happened?

Jonah: I'm in the boat to Tarshish, when God sends a storm raging over the sea. The crew cries to *their* gods to save us. They throw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Still the storm rages. The ship sinks deeper into the waves.

Mrs Jonah: Oh Jonah, how terrible! What did you do?

Jonah: We draw straws to see who caused this calamity.

Mrs Jonah: (*Hands on hips*) Don't tell me! YOU draw the short straw.

Jonah: Why would you guess that?

Mrs Jonah: It's easy. YOU defied God. You know what I do when you defy ME. What did you do?

Jonah: I suggested they throw me overboard. Perhaps if I were out of the boat God would relent.

Mrs Jonah: Overboard?! Jonah, you cannot swim!

Jonah: The crew asks God to forgive them. They ask OUR God to forgive them.

Mrs Jonah: How nice, they hedge their bets. And...?

Jonah: They throw me overboard, anyway.

Mrs. Jonah What?!

Jonah: And the storm stops.

Mrs Jonah: You in the ocean, I can hardly get you to take a bath. You hate water. You'd drown in a moment. And yet by some miracle you stand before me. Who saves you?

Jonah: I should have drowned. I would have drowned. But a huge fish swallows me.

Dramatic presentation of Jonah 3:1-5,10
God changes... and invites us to change, too.

Pray with me. God may the words of our mouths and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable to you. Thank you for being both the solid rock upon which we stand and our source of mercy. Amen.

Worship Leader: (these or other introductory words)

What words would *you* use to describe God? Our reading from Jonah about his visit to the city of Nineveh, focuses on three qualities of God, characteristics of God, that we sometimes forget: God's persistence – which sometimes looks like stubbornness, God's change-ability – which sometimes looks like fickleness, and God's universality – which sometimes looks like foolishness.

Let us step back in time, and listen to what two people in ancient times think about God. Let's eavesdrop on a conversation between the prophet Jonah and his wife after Jonah's return from Nineveh, and his unexpected, close-encounter with God.

Mrs Jonah: *(Mrs Jonah Wears an apron) (Jonah walks in.)*
Jonah?! You look horrible! Where have you been?

Jonah: You will never believe it if I tell you...

Mrs Jonah: Try me. It has been weeks, no, months! since I last saw you. I am all ears. Now, *(tapping her toe)* where have you been?

Jonah: Well, I was working in the orchard pruning the olive trees when I heard God call.

Mrs Jonah: Pruning the olive trees, yes, they needed pruned ... *(sounding incredulous)* What?! Did you say you heard God call?!

Jonah: I said you wouldn't believe me.

Mrs Jonah: Well, God calling YOU is unusual. What did God have to say?

Jonah: God told me to go to Nineveh and prophesy against that wicked city.

Mrs Jonah: Nineveh? That city is filled with heathens and unbelievers! What would God want with them? Does God have anything to do with people beyond our faith? After all, the Ninevites worship other gods. They do not believe in OUR God.

Jonah: M'luv, those were my thoughts, exactly! Going to Nineveh would be a waste of my time, a fool's... *errand.*

Mrs Jonah: So, what did you do?