



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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A Grown-up Faith

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 25, 2015
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany: Based on Jonah 3:1-5,10 and Mark 1:14-20

This week I read an excerpt from a new book by the science writer Michael Shermer, titled *The Moral Arc*. For people in my business it is not a happy book, and the excerpt I read probably will be the full extent of my commitment to it. And, yet, it has something to say that we who attempt to remain religious in this world need to face honestly. It is terribly unfair to summarize an entire book, particularly one which I have not read, in a single compound sentence; but I have been doing it for years. So here it is: His major point is that despite the fact that the religions of the world claim to be the originators and purveyors of moral development, in fact it is the influence of science and reason, developed during the Enlightenment, that has promulgated the big changes in the arc toward a more moral society. As an example, Shermer argues that in the areas of slavery in the 19th century, women's rights in the 20th and gay rights in the 21st, religions got on board only after a "shamefully protracted lag time." He, of course, has a point.

He also spends a good bit of ink demythologizing the universal goodness and intent of The Ten Commandments. These rules, he claims, were for the wandering tribe of Israelites, not for the good of humankind—certainly not for the Moabites, the Edomites and the Midianites, whom the people of God hated with a purple passion and wanted to obliterate, and whose land they intended to take. And that was just the start of his diatribe about the way religions divide rather than unify. It was not much of a toss-up to decide whether to keep reading or to have a nap. But once again, he has a point.

Who can argue with him? Well, we can—not so much to win but to claim the authenticity of the meaning we find in our practice of religion. But we have to do it very carefully and very honestly. Another book I read a part of this week—apparently there wasn't much going on; this one I shall finish—is the latest and last by theologian Marcus Borg, titled *Convictions*. Sadly at a great loss to the world, Borg died this past Wednesday at the way-too-young age of 72. Many of you have read his books, and all of you who are regulars here have heard the influence of his teaching from us who fill this pulpit. An academician, theologian, and member of the Jesus Seminar, Borg did as much as anyone I know to address and redirect the kind of criticism Shermer and others make about Christianity in particular and religion in general. Borg's apology for religion, which many on the right have experienced as criticism itself, is the most accessible and hopeful argument we can offer. It is honest and stripped of nonsense, all the while remaining faithful to the presence of mystery in our search for God and meaning.

The Book of Jonah, from which we heard a small portion this morning, is a fine example of storytelling in scripture, which exists as a genre that speaks in a way to what both of these men, Borg and Shermer, brought to mind this week. Most of us learned the story of Jonah as children. If you have not read it lately, do so. It is both hilarious and poignantly relevant. In Sunday school we were taught the story about a man who, after refusing to do as God instructed, was swallowed by a whale in whose stomach he proceeded to live for three days before being spat out—unceremoniously, I presume! Early I learned that a whale's mouth is not big enough to swallow a human being and immediately reported this fact to my beleaguered and faithful teacher. Quite rightly, she informed me that the correct translation was "a big fish," not "a whale." Undeterred, I responded that my disbelief was not helped by this new information; a skeptic had been born and there was no going back.

As the story goes, God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, a country known for its ruthless aggression, to convert its citizens to the ways of Yahweh. After many twists and turns, not the least of which is Jonah's sojourn into the anatomic reaches of a big fish, the people of Nineveh—to Jonah's surprise and disgust—actually repent, turning from their wicked ways, resulting in God's deciding not to obliterate them after all. The scripture tells us, *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.*

If this were the only story in the Bible, we could use it as an argument to refute Shermer's treatise—for in this case God is indeed shown to act mercifully and beyond the tribal boundaries of God's so-called chosen people—sort of. But even here there are two problems. First, this account of God's merciful act was dependent upon the people of Nineveh adopting the ways

of the Israelite God, in the absence of which God surely would have destroyed them; and second, as we know, there are many, many other instances of God's smiting and destroying those who do not agree! Shermer sadly is right that the hard boundaries of our faith have derived, even if subconsciously and somewhat indirectly, from such stories and the unspoken nuances of others. Despite our sentimental claims that the New Testament is free of its own versions of this view of God, the case hardly can be made. Beyond the reach of mercy, there is a fair share of "being cast into the outer darkness" in our beloved testament.

So what are we to do? The phrase from this ancient story that leapt out at me this week is this one: *God changed his mind*. I was struck by these words, not perhaps as the writer would have intended, by the realization that it is not God whose mind was changed, but ours. We through the centuries indeed have come to change our minds about the nature of God, and isn't that wonderful? My argument is that such new thinking is the result of the ongoing and living presence of God in our lives. That reality coupled with our progressive moral development has changed and changes our minds about who God is and how God acts.

The good news of the gospel is that we are not bound by the images of an ancient peoples' view of God, not those of the Hebrew scripture nor the writings of early Christians. Of course, the stories of scripture inform our understanding of God but only in so far as they corroborate what we know/hope/believe to be true about God. God does not smite people; God is bigger than any one group's view of God; God does not establish only ONE right way that exists regardless of cultural differences and understandings. This is an adult view of faith.

It does not mean that we no longer love the Bible and or deny its overarching truthfulness. In the story of Jonah there are many lessons about bigotry and narrow-mindedness to be gleaned. It simply means that we move beyond a childish and churlish view of God, derived from an ancient understanding that defies all or most of what our evolution has helped us to come to understand. Any other view of the Bible suggests a static view not only of God but also of us as God's children, diminishing our capacity to be ourselves transformed and to be part of the process of bringing light and peace in the world.

Admittedly, it is scary to be religious in this way. In fact, it is much easier to be entrenched in the conviction that only we are right and that our "rightness" comes from the words of an ancient and irrefutable scripture. But when we are honest, we know that we do not believe that, and our honesty about it must come out of the shadows of our faith to be spoken with the conviction of a people transformed by an ongoing relationship with God, who is both in and beyond history.

Of course, our minds change about God; they change with the arc of history, moving us and enlarging us into ever-widening circles of love. The fact that we live, move and have our being with God in a community of faith makes our journeys safe—never simple, but safe. We don't dart off alone, creating our personal religion, but immerse ourselves in a community, like this one, like the larger one of which we are a part, a community bigger than St. Bart's and even bigger than Christianity, a community of people in search of God, where we inch our way toward a new and transforming reality one faithful step at a time, taken in sync with others on the journey.

Beloved friends, we have walked a portion of that journey together, joining our hearts and souls in the search for God; and what I know above all else is that a union such as that is eternal and that God is forever found in its midst.

In the name of God: *Amen*.