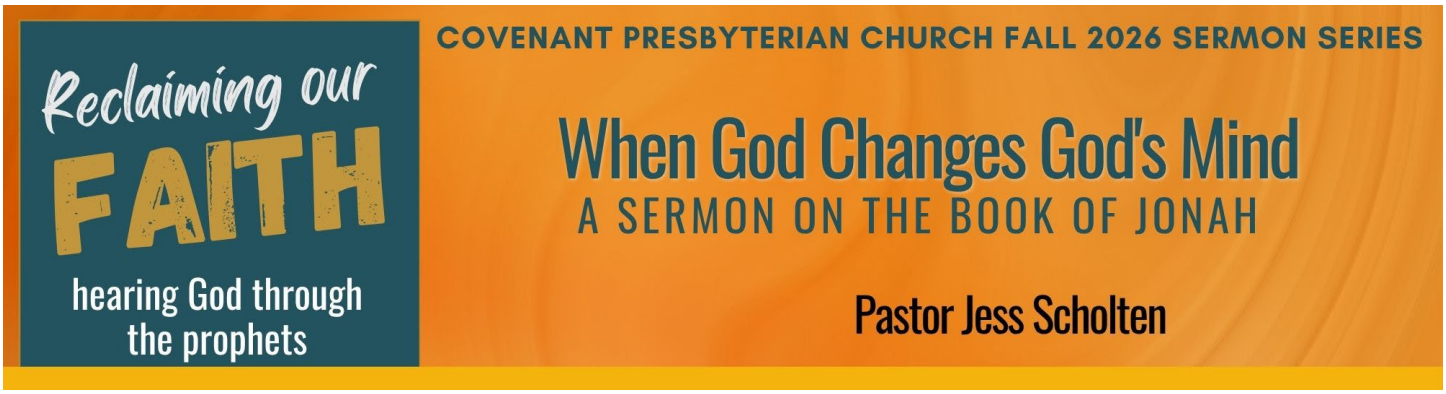


"When God Changes God's Mind" | The Book of Jonah | The Rev. Jessica C. Scholten

Last week, we heard about the world's longest sermon through Ezekiel's street performance – lying on his side for well over a year! This week, we get the world's shortest sermon: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" No mention of what Nineveh did to deserve God's wrath, no mention of what to do to repent, no mention even of God.

Just five words in Hebrew.

But one of those words is the Hebrew word for 'overthrown." Or at least, we've translated it, overthrown. It's more technically: "turned over," and in this way, against all odds, Jonah's prophesy comes true. Because the king proclaims a fast and a time of repentance – of lament in sackcloth and ashes. And all the people participate – every age – and even all the animals. In the end, they ***do*** get overturned – only it's more like a *transformation* – a change of heart.

And God changes God's own mind about the Ninevites. Instead of thunderbolts of judgment, God is gracious and relents from the calamity that was planned.

We'll see in conclusion of Act 3 how Jonah responds to this. Jonah didn't *not* go to Ninevah the first time out of fear – he didn't go out of **spite**. He throws back at God… God's own words – I knew you are merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and you would change your mind and relent.

Jonah the reluctant prophet, is what he is sometimes called. More like Jonah, the spiteful prophet. Ninevah is a big city – would have taken three days to walk across it – because it is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The Ninevites aren't just random violent prone people – they are the very people who will destroy Israel.

God's call to Jonah challenges his own lack of forgiveness and hope against his very enemy, against the very people oppressing him. Which is why Jonah is pretty uncooperative in his response. On a map of his journey, he could go a reasonable distance inland to the north east to Nineveh. Instead, he goes in the opposite direction over the sea.

Jonah is not quite as historical as our other prophets. The only other time Jonah is mentioned in the Bible is in a brief reference to a prophesy he makes to King Jeroboam II, which doesn't actually come to be, because Jeroboam is known for doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord; and another prophet, Naaman, known for challenging the unfaithful kings of Israel, prophesies the opposite – that Jeroboam will not be successful in his reign, which he is not.

Jonah is very unlike the other prophets of the Bible, and especially unlike the prophets we've talked about in this series – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel. The Book of Jonah is not made of the words of a prophet – it's a story ***about*** a prophet, a prophet who acts the opposite as expected and is just as wrong in the story as he in Scripture.

Barbara Musselman in the, *The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*, describes Jonah as arrogant and malicious. But it's possible Jonah just doesn't want to do the very thing Jesus calls us to do: love our enemies. Imagine trying to love the very people who delight in doing you harm?

So. How are you doing at loving your enemies?

Because this satirical whale of a tale is much less about the historical situation and much more about how the readers see themselves in the story. Liberation theologian and professor of Ethics and Latinx Studies, Dr. Miguel De La Torre, writes in his book: *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation*, of how this story speaks to *how* the oppressed engage with oppressors. He writes of reconciliation not as "political strategy" but as spiritual healing (5), using Jonah's story as a parallel to our current situation in the U.S and our history as a country. Like the Assyrians, we "rise only through the existence of disenfranchised groups that are needed to provide both raw material and cheap labor" (29).

Many of us in positions of privilege collectively are the Assyrians. And our siblings of color, the economically used and abused and underpaid and underinsured, and so many groups discriminated against are the Jonahs of the world. No wonder he didn't want to skip over to Nineveh and be part of God changing their hearts.

De La Torres lifts up Jonah having honest lament to God, justified anger against the Assyrians. He has been harmed by their actions. And for those of us who benefit from the oppression of others – either through our financial decisions in how we invest or shop or make money by politics or power – we are called to hold this story up as a mirror. How will we seek to repent and have a change of heart, like the Ninevites? How will we seek to reconcile with our enemies?

In the end, Jonah's unenthusiastic ministry helps those who are far off - both the sailors and the people of Nineveh – experience God's grace, and maybe… maybe… one who was near, Jonah himself. May our hearts like God's mind be overturned when we think of the wide mercy of God's love, even for our enemies. Even when we are the enemy. Amen.