

**“A Chance for Change”**  
**Jonah 3:10-4:11**  
**Rev. Andrew Connors**  
**Proper 20**  
**September 24, 2023**

If you grew up anywhere near a church you probably learned the story of Jonah. It's a favorite of children everywhere. Jonah gets swallowed by a whale. Actually, it wasn't a whale, it was a large fish - *sometimes details get lost in translation*. Jonah tried to run from God's call. Got on a boat and tried to sail as far away from God as he could go. But God sent a storm and Jonah just knew it was God out to bring him back so he asked everybody else on the boat to throw him into the sea. That's when the whale (or the large fish) gobbled him up where after 3 days and 3 nights - (Christians love that part) - he was vomited up on the land (children love that part). Try as he might Jonah could not run from God's call. That's what a lot of people remember from this text. "God called me," I've heard many a preacher say - even said it myself - "and I tried for a long time to run like Jonah until I just couldn't run any longer." But most of *our* stories about running from God's call are *more about the person* not seeing themselves as equipped or capable or comfortable enough in the role - as prophet, or preacher, disciple or some combination. Jonah's attempted escape is about Jonah's issue with *God's sense of justice, God's soft spot for mercy in situations that call for punishment. Sometimes the details get lost in translation.*

That big fish spits Jonah up and this time he makes it to Nineveh where he announces Nineveh's overthrow. Yet the people repent. They put on sackcloth - the youngest to the oldest, the most powerful and the least. Even the animals. And then the very thing Jonah feared, occurs.

Listen now for a word from God to the church this day.

[Jonah 3.10-4:11]

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A friend this week was lamenting the fact that you-know-who is running for the Presidency again and seems, incredibly, to have a good chance of getting his party's nomination after all that has happened. "Proof," my agnostic friend said confidently, "that there is no God." I didn't have the heart to tell my friend that there's an even worse alternative - that there is a God with power to intervene who has a very demented sense of justice. In our existential world, when we wrestle with theodicy - which is the fancy word for what to do with the fact that there are bad things that happen to good people routinely in our world that call into question God's presence or activity - we tend to connect theodicy with the presence or absence of God. When bad things happen, we wonder if God exists or has the power to do anything about the things that need changing in our world.

But Jonah believes God exists 110%. Jonah assumes God has the power to do anything God wants. Jonah is no deist, believing God to be the initiator of all that is but not much more, the clockmaker who sets everything in motion then retires for the rest of eternity. No. Jonah believes God is active, available, and powerful in all the ways that many of us long for in the world. The God who is real, present, active, available, and powerful. It's just that Jonah believes God's use of that power is way too generous, way too merciful toward people who don't deserve generosity or mercy. Jonah doesn't wonder if God exists. Jonah doesn't wonder if God is powerful. Jonah wonders if God is good. It's not God's absence from the scene that bothers Jonah. It's God's graciousness. It's the content of God's character that drives Jonah crazy. It's God's inclination for choosing mercy when judgment has already been pronounced. It's God's habit of granting forgiveness to people who have done things that are unforgivable that makes Jonah want to turn and run. "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment."

Which could make Jonah sound like a close-minded, vindictive person, unwilling to forgive. Maybe even xenophobic, hateful toward a country of people he doesn't even know. Jonah, the close-minded Israelite who doesn't like foreigners. That's the way Jonah has been presented in some of the reflections I've read and heard. The one close-minded prophet in Scripture we're not supposed to emulate.

*But sometimes the details get lost in the translation.* Jonah is being sent to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. At the end of the 8th century, the time period described in this story, Israel was a little vassal state stuck in between two global empires – the Egyptians to the south and the Assyrians to the north. Both demanded tribute from Israel – pay us money and we won't mess with you: a kind of nation-state mafia. At the end of the 8th century, King Hezekiah of Judah took a gamble and told the Assyrians, no I won't negotiate with terrorists. I refuse to pay you tribute. He allied himself with the Egyptians instead. The Assyrian ruler called his bluff, invaded and destroyed cities and towns with brutal carnage of the type most of us have never seen.

Jonah isn't xenophobic. Jonah isn't closed minded. He simply refuses to go to a nation-state that has done unspeakable violence to his own people. He refuses to participate in extending mercy to people who have shown none of it to others. He refuses to join God in excusing behavior that shouldn't be excused. Sometimes the details get lost in the translation.

Most of us are a lot like Jonah. We won't abide those who have abused power in our nation or in our lives after they've shown us exactly the kind of people they are. We don't want to see God's pardon offered to people who don't deserve it.

But notice what God's mercy actually means in this story. It's not excusing bad behavior. It's *announcing judgment and remaining open to the possibility of repentance.* "40 days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." God's judgment in this story is only

suspended after the people of Nineveh have put on sackcloth and sat in ashes - have made visible signs of their intention to change their ways.

It's that openness to the repentance of wrongdoers that Jonah is lacking. The openness to a relationship with someone who really does change. Which is a very difficult mindset to keep with people who have hurt you. Last week we saw that forgiveness isn't tied so much to repentance. It's more about protecting the graceful orientation of your own heart. It's more about preserving your soul's inclination toward goodness in the world than it is about someone else's bad behavior.

But this week we have to face what happens when people do change, when they are sorry, when they do express the desire to repair a relationship. And sometimes that's even harder than forgiving someone in the first place. Mostly, we see what God is really like - oriented so often to welcoming home the wayward child when she chooses to return.

I said that this story was set in the 8th century when Assyria was at the height of its empire. But like most of the Old Testament it probably wasn't written then or didn't come into the final form we have today until long after the Assyrians had been defeated by the Babylonians and the Assyrian empire was no more. In fact, it was likely told in its current form round about the time Israel was returning from exile and grappling with important questions about how to create a new community, a new nation. There were those returning to the land with a very exacting way of thinking about faithfulness. They were perhaps judgmental about some of the decisions that fellow Israelites had made, decisions they believed had led to God's punishment in the first place. There were others who recognized that it would be nearly impossible to rebuild a community without some way for those who had done wrong in the past, to be forgiven for it. This story was a piece of their advocacy for how to deal with people who had done terrible things before. As long as they are willing to leave those old decisions behind, this story seems to say, they can be as much a part of the community as anyone.

With you-know-who running for President again, there's certainly a lot of work to be done by all of us. The need to proclaim God's justice as the most important thing that could determine the future of our country. How well we treat the stranger, the poor, those on the margins in our society, becoming more inclusive in all the ways we need to welcome the amazing diversity that God has blessed us with as a nation. But in the process of proclaiming that message we're challenged by Jonah to remain open to so-called enemies who actually change, who actually learn more about justice and change their outlook and approach as a result. We're challenged to take care that our zeal for justice doesn't slouch into a thinly veiled vengeance that cares more about defeating anyone who has ever wronged us - becoming the grievance-fueled people with a grudge that we're supposed to be opposing. *God seeks Nineveh's conversion, not their destruction*, maintaining the hope and goal of all people healthy and secure with everything they need for a meaning-filled life.

If that grace-filled hope for some of your domestic enemies sounds outlandish, well just remember that the United States is in a similar position that Assyria was in years ago. We are one of the global empires. There are all kinds of Jonahs around the world who look at you and me as a great undifferentiated mass of bullies who extract the choicest fruits from the rest of the world and expect to extract God's grace in a similar way. God seems to look at all of us as people. People God has created, cares about, and wants to see do well, together.

Instead of thinking about a 2024 rematch as a depressing time to further entrench, I wonder what would happen if we viewed it instead as *God giving all of us more time to change*. Another opportunity to get better. Another chance to engage those we believe have done actual harm and need to change. Additional time granted for us to change, reclaiming politics as the way of solving problems together instead of allowing ourselves to be lured back into the cynical view of a slugfest between people who have already characterized each other in flat, dishonest ways.

Doing that, I think, requires getting to the complex story of each person you meet instead of settling for the summary that we too often create in order to avoid engaging people in the first place. Like Jonah, *so much of each story gets lost in translation*.

The details of each person is where the truth lies. Each person God has created, invested in, laborer over. And while it may be unrealistic to expect everyone to put on sackcloth and sit in ashes, some of us were given chances to change in all sorts of ways. We were given an opportunity to become more of the person God created us to become. Wouldn't we want to give others the same?