

We find ourselves today in the port city of Joppa, down at the harbor, on the Mediterranean Sea. Nineveh is inland, eastward, and attempting to flee from God's commission, Jonah boards a ship traveling westward by sea - starkly in the opposite direction.

Where can you escape "the God of heaven, who made land and sea?"

His resentment at the call God placed upon his life, fueled by his hatred, sends him running. And yet, just a few beats after boarding the boat, he is faced with the reality that there is nowhere to escape his god, the God of heaven and earth, who made the land and sea. In other moments, I imagine the omnipresence of God was of comfort to Jonah, and yet, in this moment, I imagine him saying it to the sailors with a tween-worthy eye-roll.

When asked to love his enemy, Jonah tries to flee from God's presence, and is frustrated that he can't.

It's interesting to me that the sailors now, when the sea rages, and when Jonah is in the belly of the fish, they both say something like:

"I will give sacrifices to you, and I will praise and thank you. I will make special promises to you, and I will do what I promise."

Which is interesting - and I think, human. When God has given us a clear mandate, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love our enemies by holding them to account and inviting repentance for harm done - we start making promises about the rituals we'll do... the displays of piety we'll make for God... when what he wants is justice.

This is a constant theme through the prophets, the written tradition which Jonah is part. There is a central question that the prophets pose, and answer, in response to the world around them: does God want us to practice our religious rituals perfectly and beautifully while living abhorrent lives - oppressing the poor, ignoring the cry of the suffering, abandoning the naked? Or does God want us to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly – even in regards to our religious lives?

Amos answers the question this way: **21** The LORD says, 'When you have your festivals, I hate them! When you meet to worship me, it does not make me happy!

Now, of course, we are all here to worship, and gathered here, we experience the Holy Spirit, this is a place where we can organize for greater societal impact than we could on our own – I am a religious professional, I believe in the value of worship and church. But when the lives of the people worshipping and leading worship and feigning piety are actively oppressing their neighbors, enriching themselves on the backs of the most vulnerable, God doesn't want their worship. The incense of prayer rising up starts to stink!

Jonah also finds himself on the shoreline between death and life, as he is thrown overboard and describes (in Jonah 2) being on the verge of drowning, the bars of the Pit about to shut him in. When suddenly, he is swallowed by a big fish provided by the God who made the land and the sea. In the belly of the whale, he is alive but not fully rescued - under water but able to breathe. Jonah is on the shoreline between life and death, hurling himself headlong into the sea, into the pit of death. hilariously, the fish ultimately vomits him back onto dry land; the shoreline battle continues.

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Jonah is not only tempest tossed literally, while aboard the ship, but is wrestling with God throughout his story. This is a story of struggle with God, arguing with God, trying to fight against God's call, God's intent, God's will. This is a story of churning, and stubbornness, and locked horns. It is a tempestuous story. And yet, the whole tempest seems to have been created by Jonah, not God or the Ninevites.

Of course, the Assyrians, represented by the city-dwellers in Nineveh, have been a cruel nation; the worst enemies of the Israelites, having conquered the Northern Kingdom, taking people captive and occupying the land. God's call on Jonah's life is not neutral - it's a request to minister to the oppressors of his own people. Wouldn't many of us run as well?

Naturally, this makes me think of the Barbie movie (2023). In this film, the Kens take over Barbieland, turning Barbie Dreamhouses into Mojo Dojo Casa Houses, and implementing the social structures of patriarchy, explicitly, after Ken got a taste of patriarchy when he arrived in our world. In the end, Ken isn't fulfilled by patriarchy at all, isn't any more connected to others by wielding power and coercive control. Ken comes to realize that patriarchy isn't good for him (or other Kens) either, because what he really

wants is connection. Barbieland doesn't need liberation from men, but liberation from patriarchy.

In the same way as the Kens, we can become misguided, thinking that we need liberation from a certain kind of people, rather than liberation from a system, from tyranny. And, as hard as it is to believe, it is important to remember that those oppressive systems have negative impacts on the oppressors as well. Creating and maintaining systems of subjugation, coercive control, and punishing power deteriorates the humanity of the oppressor as well. Yes, these upholders of oppressive systems *benefit* from those systems continuing, typically in regards to money and power and pride, but that *benefit* does not mean it is in the pursuit of everlasting life and human flourishing for themselves. Do we think it is good for the soul of Benjamin Netanyahu to be genocidal? No! Of course not. Think of how much soul-sickness must you have to become genocidal. How significantly have he and others marred the image of God in himself? Made it sick and twisted with hatred. If we are a people who believe that all people are made in the image of God, then redeeming that image includes redeeming that image in *everyone*. Calling for the end to the genocide, and calling Netanyahu and all who have carried out his commands, is also good for him. (Is your stomach churning now, too?)

As I was planning this week in this series a month or so ago, ICE raids throughout Los Angeles had sparked days of protests, and the federal government called in the National Guard and Marines in response. Donald Trump posted online that his intent was to “liberate” Los Angeles from the “Migrant Invasion.” The residents of Los Angeles protest and resist ICE raids because they don’t sense a need to be liberated from migrants, but to be liberated from imperial forces of power, a system that practices disappearing people. Employing people to carry out these disappearing acts is also undignified, carrying out these disappearing acts also damages the image of God in the one carrying it out; it is an act on behalf of the spiritual forces of wickedness, marring the image of God in themselves. On the other hand, being snatched from the neighborhood, or from work, or from public transportation, being hidden away without access to restrooms or food, light, or fresh air is humiliating, and injures a person’s dignity. Oppressive systems damage the image of God of all people involved.

And so, we are called to prophesy, no matter how much it makes our stomachs turn. Jonah, giving in, can hardly stomach it, understandably, to prophesy redemption to the people of Nineveh. But he goes, and proclaims, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4b NRSV). As they teach in the [BibleProject overview of Jonah](#), that

Hebrew word translated to overthrown is maybe more like ‘overturned,’ and though Jonah might think turning over will look Nineveh being conquered by another nation, they are turned over, turned upside down; their behavior changes 180 degrees... they repent, even the tyrant.

The story of Jonah reveals to us that when proclaiming justice, we don’t know how those proclamations will come about, but know that our rage and resistance against the tempests of the empire will be used by God to enact redemption, repentance, restoration beyond our wildest dreams.

“From the halls of power to the fortress tower

Not a stone will be left on stone

Let the king beware for your

Justice tears ev’ry tyrant from his throne”

The tyrant in Jonah is not torn from his throne in the way Jonah imagined, but no longer was there a tyrant on the throne. Tyranny was torn from the throne of the Assyrian empire, by the power of God’s Word spoken through the prophet, enacting repentance.

