

The Sign of Jonah

Matthew 12:38-41

Sunday, November 21, 2021 – Aledo UMC

Rev. Dr. David R. Schultz



It was during the summer of 1988 when a free book arrived in our mailbox. It was entitled, *“88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988,”* and it was written by Edgar Whisenant.

If you’re not familiar with the word “rapture,” let’s just say that many evangelicals identify that as the first step in the return of Christ and the end of the world.

Edgar was not a preacher; rather, he was an engineer for NASA, so he was an intelligent, well-educated man who also liked working with numbers. I was a young preacher then, serving a little congregation in Geneseo and his book made a lot of sense to me. But there was just one problem: Edgar said that the rapture of the church would happen during the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah that year and that just happened to fall during our son Jonathan’s third birthday. I knew Candice had a party planned for Jonathan; she hadn’t planned on Rosh Hashanah as the party’s theme, but I knew it was going to be special and I didn’t want Jonathan’s party to be interrupted by the Second Coming of Christ. I was torn.

Of course, we now know that Christ did not return during Rosh Hashanah 1988. Instead, in the years since we've seen any number of would-be prophets set a date for the Second Coming of Christ; so far, every one of those predictions has failed:

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Falwell both said Christ would come on Y2K, the beginning of this new millennium.

Harold Camping famously predicted the Second Coming of Christ on May 21, 2011.

And of course, last week I mentioned the 2012 phenomenon and the conviction some held that the end of the world would come on 12/12/2012.

In that sermon, the disciples asked for a sign; Jesus' answer was rather vague, and the signs Jesus talked about sounded more like routine history than a specific sign.

As I was preaching during the 10:30 service last week, I sensed the Spirit nudging me to preach a follow-up sermon in which we looked at another instance in which someone asked Jesus for a sign of the end. You see, I've been around long enough to see more than my share of failed prophecies concerning the Second Coming of Christ and the subsequent end of the world. I've seen it. I've been there. And I regret that I've even preached it. But I'm not falling for it again. I refuse to confuse routine history with the end of the world. And yet, I believe the words of Jesus, and I believe that Christ was telling the truth when he said he would return. And I want to preach the truth to you.

I guarantee Jesse Duplantis was not preaching the truth to his followers this past September when he said during his Victory-thon fundraiser that the reason why Christ had not yet returned was because God's people weren't giving enough to the work of God. Specifically, they weren't giving enough money to Jesse Duplantis. You can't blame Jesse, though, because it costs a lot of money to maintain your own private jet.

I find that disturbing on two levels: first, Jesse Duplantis assumes that the return of Christ is a good thing. And it will be good for many. But Christ's return also comes with judgment, and that will not be good for many. The book of Revelation tells us that up to a third of the world's population will be destroyed. Why would anyone be in a hurry to bring that about?

Secondly, by saying that Christians weren't giving enough, Jesse Duplantis was really blaming believers: *It's your fault that Christ hasn't returned. I'm going to blame you for not giving enough thereby delaying the return of Christ.*

That, my friends, is spiritual abuse. *I'm going to blame you for what I—and I alone—perceive as your failure. I'm going to make you feel guilty when you haven't done anything wrong. Meanwhile, I'm going to keep flying around in my personal jet conducting more Victory-thon fundraisers.*

Where's the truth? Let's turn to the scriptures. Matthew 12:38—

38 Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of

Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

Notice what Jesus says: *I'm only going to give you one sign of my return—only one!—and that is the sign of Jonah.*

And then—rather uncharacteristically—Jesus explains the sign. And it's a two-fold explanation.

First, Jesus reminds us that Jonah “died” (as it were) and spent three days in what amounted to a watery tomb, otherwise known as the belly of the fish. But after three days, God commanded the fish to spit Jonah out onto dry land—not in the middle of the ocean, but onto dry land! Jonah's fishy experience was a picture of death, burial, and being raised from the dead.

But there's more. Jesus didn't stop there. After Jonah was delivered from the fish, he went to Israel's arch enemy, the city of Nineveh, where he was commanded to warn the city of impending judgment.

It must have been a terrible, judgmental fire-and-brimstone sermon. Remember, Jonah did not want the Ninevites to repent. In chapter 4, Jonah explains why he didn't want to preach to the Ninevites, saying, “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, **a God who relents from sending calamity**” (vs. 2).

Did you catch that: he is “a God who relents from sending calamity. And repent they did—from the king himself to the lowliest pauper. Even the animals were made to wear the sackcloth of repentance.

And guess what happened: nothing. No destruction. God relented. God changed his mind. Why? Because the people of Nineveh repented. And that's the sign of Jonah for us today:

As long as we repent, God will relent.

When I was introduced to this church, I was told this is a praying church. And I can testify to the truth of that. But do you know what why we pray? Do you know the purpose for prayer?

The purpose of prayer is to change the mind of God.

Does that sound shocking to you? I assure you: it's absolutely true. And that's exactly what happened in Nineveh. God was determined to pour out judgment on Nineveh and utterly destroy it. But the people of Nineveh prayed, and God changed his mind. And the city was spared. **As long as we repent, God will relent.** And that's the sign of Jonah.

I'm going to say something that is shocking. I can't prove I'm right, but you can't prove that I'm wrong. Either way, here it is: Edgar Whisenant, Tim LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, Harold Camping, and all the rest may very well have been one hundred percent right. Jesus Christ may have been set to return at the times and dates they had predicted, setting in motion the end of the world.

But there's one thing those prophets did not take into consideration, and that is God's infinite ability to hear our prayers, change his mind, and bestow grace and mercy upon us. But Jonah knew God is compassionate. Jonah knew that God would relent. Jonah took God's grace into consideration; that's why he didn't want to go to Nineveh.

Can you imagine if God had said to the people of Nineveh, “It’s nice that you’ve repented; it’s sweet that you’ve cried out to me for mercy. But guess what: I’m still going to destroy you. I’m still going to pour out my judgment on you and kill you and your children and your grandchildren and your servants and your livestock.”

What kind of a God would that be? I wouldn’t want to serve a God like that; would you? Thankfully, though, the scriptures teach us that **as long as we repent, God will relent.**

For that matter, the disciples and the first generation of Christians believed that they were living in the last days; that Christ would return in their lifetime. And why wouldn’t they believe that?

Hadn’t Jesus said in Matthew 16:28, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Jesus may have been all set to return in 70 AD when Jerusalem fell to the Romans and the temple was destroyed. But something else happened in 70 AD. God’s people prayed. And God changed his mind. The world did not end.

I have a strong suspicion that the same thing happened right around June 6, 1944. It was World War II and it looked like Bible prophecy was being fulfilled everywhere we looked. Adolf Hitler acted like the ultimate antichrist. Under Hitler, six million Jews perished in the Holocaust. America was secretly building a nuclear bomb. And preachers proclaimed that the end of the world had arrived.

But something happened. World War II was not the end of the world. Why? Because someone prayed. I know General George Patton prayed because I read the prayer that he wrote following that D-Day campaign. And God relented. The world did not end in 1944.

Likewise, something happened in 1988; something happened in 1999; something happened in 2006 and again in 2012. And what was that something?

People prayed. People repented. And God had mercy. For **as long as we repent, God will relent.**

I’m sorry, Jesse Duplantis, but what we do with our money—how we give of our resources—will not affect the return of Jesus Christ. That’s because we cannot monetize—we cannot commodify the return of Christ.

But the way we pray very likely has an impact on his return because as long as we repent, God will relent.

That’s the sign of Jonah. Let us pray.