

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**March 7, 2021, The Third Sunday of Lent**

Matthew 20:1-13, Jonah 4:5-10

**LENTEN SERMON SERIES: "THE SIGN OF JONAH – TURN AROUND"**

Turn Around! Really, it's the theme of Lent, right? Turn Around! Looking at our bad behavior or bad thoughts, and making a change. Repentance is just turning around, and going in the other direction. The definition of sin is missing the mark, and repentance is accepting we've missed the mark and making the necessary course corrections to Turn Around.

We've all done it. It's the "Oops, I messed up again" moment. We were taught as little children to feel guilty about the things we did wrong, and to do it differently. My friend Judy tells a story, many children could probably tell. She remembers a time when she was probably about 10. Her mom told her she could go and take \$2 from her purse. She opened her mom's purse and she did have two ones, but there was also a \$5. She took two bills, but one was a \$1 and the other was the \$5. For a couple weeks she hid her theft, justifying it by telling herself that she had taken 2 bills, even though it wasn't \$2. Finally, her guilt became too much for her young heart to contain, and she confessed to her Mom what she'd done. "I'm glad you told me," she said, "but I'm very disappointed with you. (the worst thing you can hear as a child!) I can't trust you now. You'll have to earn that trust back." Eventually Judy turned around that act of stealing from her mother; she did the work to earn her trust again.

In this latest installment from the book of Jonah, we have the fruits of Jonah's one sentence sermon. Remember how he begrudgingly preached his one-line sermon – "*Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*"

No style, no flowery speech or well-explained details there.

No earnest words, or dramatic talent.

Nope, blunt and stark, that's our Jonah.

AND IT WORKED! Amazingly, it worked! Everyone, EVEN THE CATTLE, put on the sackcloth of repentance, sat in ashes, and fasted. Even the cattle! (Kind of makes you wish you could have been there, to see the cattle in sackcloth, right!?)

And all of this act of repentance, this sackcloth and ashes and fasting – was traditional for the ancient Near East - in the hopes that God's mind would be changed, that God would also repent.

Because it's not just the city of Nineveh that is turning around, right?

It is also God who is turning around, who is repenting of a course of action.

Everyone in Nineveh is turning, turning away from the evil they had been doing, and asking God to notice that things are different.

It's like Judy hoping her mom would notice that she was a changed child, not like the one who stole money from her wallet. Judy had turned around, and hoped that her mom would also turn around, and start trusting her again.

And it worked. It worked for Judy and her mom, and it worked for Nineveh and God.

The relationship between Judy and her mom was restored, and the relationship between God and Nineveh was restored, too.

God's mind was changed, and Nineveh was spared.

Does this part of the story surprise you? We think of God as being eternal, unchangeable, unchanging. What we mean by that, I think, is that God is always there, that God doesn't have a beginning or an end.

Because in truth, we count on the fact that God does change and can change. That's why we pray, in the hopes that a course of action will change,

that our prayers will somehow affect what was about to happen, from not happening.

So, we shouldn't be surprised to hear about God's mind changing,

about repenting of an action, about things not being set in stone.

It's a good thing, that things can change,

that we can all grow and develop and learn and change.

Even God. Even God.

In another couple weeks we will hear again Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Unless we think Jesus was just putting on a show,

we have to admit that Jesus' prayer was intended to change God's mind,

that Jesus hoped the path he saw before him - of arrest, torture and death -

wouldn't have to happen.

I believe Jesus' prayer in the Garden was real, real and honest.

He sincerely hoped that there could be another way of showing humanity what it meant to live in perfect harmony with God's will other than his death.

In that case, there was no other way, and God wept to see his beloved son die.

For now, we have this tremendous success story. Jonah's sermon worked, and the entire city of Nineveh repented; they turned around. And so, God repented, too.

You'd think Jonah would be pleased. Next week we hear the end of the story. Let me just say: sometimes there's just no pleasing a person! AMEN

With support from Creative Communications and the Rev. Judy Anderson-Bauer, Duluth, MN