

Jonah
Winds of Change – Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes
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*show veggie tales trailer

We all know the story of Jonah. But let's be honest, those veggie tales really make it come alive.

When Jonah is called by God the first time, he runs quickly in the opposite direction. We are not provided the reason for Jonah's running. Of course, there are all sorts of reasons one might run from God and God's call. God does, after all, want Jonah to go to Nineveh, "the wicked city." The capital of the Assyrian empire, the headquarters of oppression. In the veggie tales version the sins of Nineveh is that they slap one another with fish. No matter their sins though it seems clear that if you ask anyone about Nineveh, say Zephaniah¹ or Nahum², they will tell you: Nineveh is a desolation, a bloody city. They will tell you: We will clap our hands when Nineveh is destroyed!³ It would seem that being called to Nineveh is reason enough for Jonah to run.

So it shouldn't be any wonder to us that Jonah takes flight towards somewhere else entirely. And in turn – God sends....wind. We aren't surprised that there's

wind at this point are we? Spoiler alert – there is more wind to come this summer!

Anyway, God sends, wind, wind and waves and well a fish to swallow Jonah and to make him think about his decisions. God gives Jonah a “break” as we like to call it in our house or a time out as you might call it in yours. Act like a petulant child – get treated like a petulant child Jonah.

But when God calls Jonah a second time—after his encounter with the big fish – Jonah, though still reluctant, answers the call of God .

This time, Jonah listens to God, goes to Nineveh, and delivers a message of doom to that great city. Jonah delivers one of the shortest sermons of all time: “Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

And the whole city responds! We’re talking city-wide revival. Animals, not just people, are fasting. Animals are putting on sackcloth. All are turning from their wickedness and violence. Even the king is covered in ashes. Like several of the details in the book of Jonah, exaggeration is used as a literary device: the city’s response to Jonah’s sermon is over the top.

And what does God do?

God changes God's mind about the disaster that God was going to bring to this evil city. God relents and has mercy on the people of Nineveh and it is in this moment that we realize at least one of the reasons why Jonah was running in the first place.

You see, as soon as he learns that God is going to offer mercy - Jonah is furious! He is outraged! I can just see Jonah, "I knew this was going to happen! I just knew it. I saw this coming a mile back! This is why I fled to Tarshish. This is why I went in the opposite direction of Nineveh. This is why I ran from that call, God. This, what you are doing here, God. This. I knew you were a merciful God, a God of compassion, giving birth to mercy. I knew you were a God of steadfast love. I've been reading Exodus 34! And I knew somewhere deep down from reading *Torah* that this mercy and love was not just for me and Israelites. I knew— that if we gave these Ninevites, a chance, you would do your mercy thing, your relenting thing, and you wouldn't bring disaster upon them. You would relent. I knew you'd change your mind. That king of Nineveh was right all along about you and your mercy, your ability to change your mind."

So, Jonah concludes: “I would rather die than see THEM receive your mercy!”

Ouch....already he has forgotten his own second chance offered by the God of mercy.

Jonah was called by God to a place he did not want to go. To a people he did not care for. And God sent wind to change Jonah’s mind. And while the wind may no longer be blowing in this part of the story, it is clear that Jonah was called too – to bring about a message that in turn would bring about the kind of change he wanted no part in.

We might be tempted at this point in the story to think that Jonah has overreacted. Why all this anger and animosity? After all, I would love to deliver today a 7 word sermon and receive such a large community wide response to my ministry. A whole city—animals, kings, and all – turning towards the ways of God. And yet, I can’t help but see us, even if only a little bit, in Jonah.

We want to be about the work of God, really we do. But like Jonah we maybe would prefer it didn’t come with change? Or if it has to change can it change in ways that don’t say, put us in the uncomfortable belly of the fish? I’m more than willing to answer God’s call but I sure wish it would lead to our own expected outcomes. However, that just isn’t always the case when we work alongside the creator of the cosmos.

I see us, the people of God, in Jonah. Because we too can get a little bit spiritually pouty when the wind of change causes chaos or at the very least causes discomfort. But that's the thing about God's winds of change. Sometimes they are going to land us in places we don't want to be. In situations we wouldn't wish for, or in situations where we have no idea what is happening, and in those moments I wonder if the wind of chaos is really calling us to difficult change, and growth. I wonder if the wind is calling us to stretch and dig deep to become the people and the community God is calling us to be.

You know there is something about the water in this story too. You don't get swallowed up by a fish if you are standing in shallow water. Perhaps there was something to the wind moving in the deep waters of the ocean. Change can't happen I don't think in shallow water. Have you ever found yourself standing in shallow waters? I've been in the shallow waters. Where I try not to think too much about God's mercy and compassion, but instead spend a great deal of time focusing on who around me stands in need of some judgment. Shallow waters. Where I've read enough Torah and heard enough Jesus to know about God's mercy and acceptance, forgiveness, and love. But I'm not quite ready to have those concepts operating in all of my relationships.

Shallow waters.

Where I can sing “There is a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea” but then think “yeah, BUT that wideness probably has some limits, probably ends before we get to the Ninevites.”

Shallow waters.

Where I know there might be a different way to be and live in the world – or dare I say be and live as church and community, but I brush that off because it will impact my schedule, the way I like to worship, and it will upset my own comfortability and privilege.

Shallow Waters.

But here’s the thing about God. While we are standing in those shallow waters, God calls us to Nineveh. Now we have our own Ninevah’s I know we do, places and peoples we do not want to go.

And perhaps friends, this is where we stand. Because as we are imaging the winds of change working in our community and the ways we might be stretched I wonder what deep waters God is calling us into. What discoveries is God calling us to make.

Jim Lockard, in his book, *Being the Beloved Community* points out that sometimes even as the culture around us changes we refuse to change with it. One of the examples he gives for this is the reality that Sunday in our culture is no longer

sacred. Most families and people are just as busy on Sunday mornings as they are any other day of the week. And yet, across America, most churches still meet on Sunday mornings without offering another opportunity at a different time for people to worship.

I'm not implying that is the specific thing we are being called to – but what I am implying is that if we want to call our core values – welcome, grow, and serve, we might find that to live into that we will have to go into the deep waters of thinking creatively, of getting out of our long held boxes of “the way things are done”, and living in the uncomfortable places to be the community we say we are.

Perhaps we will be called to a place of letting go of some long held traditions in the name of mercy and welcome. Perhaps we will be called to a place outside our walls so our welcome might be known out there – and perhaps too those places will feel foreign and new and uncomfortable. You know we talk a lot about the potential and the new thing God is doing – but God doesn't do that new thing alone. For God to do a new thing for God to continue to be at work in our community and the world we have to continue to be committed to stretching and wading into the deep waters. We, no matter how whiny and distraught, we become, have to continue to be committed to working for the ways of God.

I ran across this quote this week by Bishop Stephen Charleston that reveals the kind of heart I think we ought to have as we wade into the deep waters and stand in the whirling winds of change.

“I will not stop caring, whatever the cost. I will not cease loving, no matter the consequences. The political winds may howl above me, scattering people like leaves in a storm, but I will hold fast to the common ground, the wisdom that once formed us. Difference is not a crime. Diversity is not a threat. Disagreement is not a failure. Community requires of me what it requires of others, a commitment to share in the process of justice. There are no expendable human beings in the process, only a sacrifice of privilege. For the sake of the many, I will not stop caring for the few.”

God calls, go to the places you don't want to go, change for the sake of mercy and love. Should we go, we quickly will realize that we will have to leave our shallow waters and wade deeper into the water, but it is in the deep waters that God changes us and the world. It is in the deep waters that God is making things new, it is in the deep waters that mercy is found for all.

Thank God, that when we wade into the water—God's gonna trouble the water.

Amen.

