

“It’s All About Perspective,” based on Jonah 3:10-34:11 and Philippians 1:21-30

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Sept. 24, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Hear ye the decree: *“That from and after the first day of August, One thousand, seven hundred and forty-seven, no man or boy within that part of Britain called Scotland, other than such as shall be employed as Officers and Soldiers in His Majesty's Forces, shall, on any pretext whatever, wear or put on the clothes commonly called Highland clothes (that is to say) the Plaid, Philabeg, or little Kilt, Trowse, Shoulder-belts, or any part whatever of what peculiarly belongs to the Highland Garb; and that no tartan or party-coloured plaid of stuff shall be used for Great Coats or upper coats, and if any such person shall presume after the said first day of August, to wear or put on the aforesaid garment or any part of them, every such person so offending ... For the first offence, shall be liable to be imprisoned for 6 months, and on the second offence, to be transported to any of His Majesty's plantations beyond the seas, there to remain for the space of seven years.”*

And so that is the decree that came out, banning the traditional clothing of the Scottish people. It was part of the 1746 Acts of Proscription imposed by the Parliament of Great Britain. These acts were a punishment, after a failed rebellion started by Charles Stuart. Charles believed his grandfather should never have been deposed, and that his father, James Francis Edward Stuart, should be king. Both were descendants of Mary, Queen of Scots, and James the I of England and the VI of Scotland, and so, Charles sought the support of the Scottish clans, and had it, until his decision to retreat, along with Charles’s lack of commitment to full Scottish independence. The uprising lasted just 5 months.

The decision to ban the tartans was an attempt to put an end to the friction between Scotland and England by removing their outward signs of their cultural heritage and make them English. The Acts of Proscription sought unity by conformity, by conforming the people to one identity. They believed that this would finally settle the power struggle between England and Scotland. It was repealed 36 years later – yes for 36 years it was a difficult time to live in Scotland and be Scottish.

They lived with the specter of imprisonment and even enslavement for expressing your family identity. So, the legend we celebrate today, is that in the sanctuary space of the “kirk,” or church, the people exposed their tartans for a moment at the end of the service, as the minister delivered the benediction, blessing, or “kirkin” so that the tartan and with it, the family and family identity, that was under attack by British assimilation efforts.

As violent and turbulent as these times were in the post-Reformation power struggles, it pales in comparison to the reality that many faced in the Roman and Assyrian empires. The city of Philippi was a small village until the Roman General Marc Antony settled retired veterans there after the defeat of Julius Caesar’s assassins. Antony wanted to become Caesar and was defeated by Augustus who re-founded the city, sending 1,000 Roman citizens, to be a colony, an extension of the city of Rome itself, permitting local self-rule and tax-exempt status to the full citizens who lived there, and much worse to anyone who wasn’t. From this point, Roman values of supremacy of the Roman way were to emanate in Greece changing the culture, bringing peace.

The Roman way was the exertion of power to overcome nations and impose Roman culture. They assimilated the people as Alexander did, by assimilating their gods. Or, as they did with the Jews,

they undermined the ruling authorities by taking control of the whole temple system, in exchange for obedience.

Assimilation and unity by uniformity was central to the Assyrian Empire's goals as well. They were known for their cruelty, and some historians believe all the talk of impalement is a sign that they invented crucifixion. This is the punishment that Rome later perfected to impose its "peaceful occupation." Like Rome would later, the Assyrians crucified, or at least impaled, people on wooden monuments around cities they conquered. In the destruction of Israel, they did this, and what's more, they even bragged of skinning people alive to spread fear. It was much worse then.

The Assyrians then removed leaders and prominent citizens of the places they conquered and humbled them to be servants elsewhere. Meanwhile, they brought in new leaders, Assyrian citizens, to exalt them in a conquered land. This was done with careful planning to build up different parts of the empire by forcing many nations, including Israel, to learn a common language. This is because in doing so you remove one more layer of ethnic identity.

It is estimated that in addition to the possibly tens of thousands of Israelites who were removed, Assyria did this to another 3-4 million people destroying many individual nations. And so, this is the backdrop for the story of Jonah, which we read today. The historical figure of Jonah is as a prophet of King Jeroboam II, a particularly bad king in Israel's history under which all suffered. (Side note: If you're reading the list of kings, it's rare you find one that didn't say they did evil in the sight of God.)

But Jonah prophesied victory for Jeroboam and it happened. Israel expanded its territory. That is, until Amos came from Judah, to prophesy instead that that would be undone, and those lands would be lost again. And so, for readers of the short book of the Prophet Jonah, this is the backdrop. Jonah, a pro-Israel prophet, has been asked to prophesy to Israel's enemy – Ninevah, the Assyrians.

Already a conquering empire for 130 years at the time of Jonah, it was reasonable to assume then, that Assyria would soon come for them. And so it happened, just about 50 years after Jonah was a prophet. So, whether this story is history or a parable, what God is saying through it, is that even knowing what Assyria would do to Israel, the God of Israel sought reconciliation by sending an Israelite prophet to the nations.

You see, what we read in the book of Jonah is that the prophet did not like the Lord his God. No, he liked that Israel was supposed to be favored by this mighty deity, but he disliked the idea of a God who is merciful, loving, and forgiving. His desire for God, was to have a vengeful, angry, and punishing god, who would destroy anyone opposed to his chosen people. But, perhaps, having had his first prophecy come true, and then only to have it reversed, he knows better. And so, he recites the Lord's self-description in Exodus of being merciful, slow to anger, rich in love.

We have seen some of the extent to which Russia will go toward gaining world power today. We have seen the cruelties imposed by Isis and the Taliban in their pursuit of power. What would you do if God said sure destruction would come upon them, unless you preached repentance to them, keeping them in power? What would you do, knowing that if they repented right then, God would be merciful, slow to anger, and faithfully loving, even if the people do not stick to their repentance and resume their evil ways? Of course, Jonah knows the truth of this because his own people have

not been faithful, and his King is one of the worst, and yet God remains. No nation is free from cruelty and mistakes.

Jonah is an anti-hero in every step of his story. God calls him and he runs away. His ship hits a storm, and he takes a nap, trying to hide from being recognized. When he is found, he admits whose God is his god, and he is thrown overboard. He is swallowed by a giant sea creature – don't worry there was no taxonomy like we have today distinguishing between a whale and a fish. So in this giant sea creature, he was entombed in it for three days, and spit out alive on the shore, praying for deliverance. He does what is asked of him, but does the bare minimum. He predicts Ninevah's destruction, but in doing so, he does not mention the Lord God, or the Lord God's mercy. Yet, the people still respond, even the animals do too.

Jonah and Paul are similar in their foundation stories – they begin by opposing God's will. They think they know better than God, opposing what God is doing in the world. Unlike Paul, Jonah disregards a direct order from the Lord and runs away. Paul merely fails to see the truth at first in the Christians whose death and persecution he oversees. Jonah is then the subject of a three-day entombment in the whale, while Paul spends three days entombed by his blindness after he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus. Once brought back and made whole, both respond. Jonah does so in a lackluster manner. Paul gives it all he's got.

Hence in our readings today, we see two different perspectives on God's mercy. In the first story, Jonah runs because he knows God will be merciful and his fear, his anger and his hate for his enemies runs much deeper than his love for his God. In our second story, Paul turns from his hatred of the Christian movement, and doesn't merely end his persecution, but spreads the news, bringing the good news of Jesus to the nations, the very nations that are the enemies of the Jews.

Jonah is so mad at God he asks for death, but Paul recognizes his life has meaning. To die means he is with Christ, Paul says, but to live is to do the work of Christ. He prioritizes the work of reconciliation with the people of Philippi, a colony of Rome, an extension of the persecuting empire that worships false gods. Rome even worships itself. It is estimated that there may have been as few as 30 to 40 people in the church at Philippi, a city of 10,000.

He implores the people to live in a manner worthy of the gospel not by opposing those who oppose them, but recognizing that those who want them to conform to Rome's way of power are doing so to their own detriment, but to love them anyway is salvation. Jew and Greek, Jew and Roman, are to strive as one in being, one in the Holy Spirit, even in their differences.

As Paul will say in the next chapter, which we will read next week, he tells the Philippians, that they should put on the mind of Christ, and regard others as better than themselves, refusing to act out of individual ambition or vanity, because it was Christ Jesus, who being equal to God, did not regard this as a power to exploit, but in humility shared in our humanity, emptying himself of power, being born a human, even in the appearance of one enslaved. Jesus was obedient to God and also to our human limits, even to the point of death, death on Rome's cross, only to rise again so that all people of every nation might call him Lord.

Indeed, this reconciliation of humanity to God means that we, as human beings, must reconcile humanity with itself. We are called as Christ's followers being a light to all nations, as Paul would say later, echoing the call of Abraham. This means that our calling is this and not the call of Babylon

which had to be broken up because they were uniting everybody in one system to make everyone to be the same. Abraham was called to be a light to all nations. The vision of Zechariah and in Revelation is that people of every kingdom would come to the new Jerusalem to worship the one True God. This implies that if there are different kingdoms, there are different cultures and different ways of life.

Assyria tried to do mimic Babylon with its pattern of assimilation, and Rome did the same. Great Britain tried to do with the Scottish clans, saying they should be British, stop fighting, and know that we are in control. But no, Paul says we are citizens of heaven, and we are not to worry. Indeed, we are not to sweat the small differences, because we can value anything that is good. Virtue of any culture is worth focusing on, because our unity is not uniformity, but found in Christ Jesus alone, whose good news is mercy for all.

My sisters and brothers, let us learn from the mistakes of the past and refuse to be like Jonah. And instead, let us embrace the example of Paul, who calls on us to join with Jesus in the ministry of reconciliation, grounded in humility and inclusivity. Never again should Christians cause families to hide their heritage in the cause of a uniformity that erases a person's identity. Instead, we must willingly lay down our identities, or life as Christ said, and as Christ did for us. This is so that we can pick it up again with him. For in Christ we see the love of God in full to form us in our calling to love.

Beloved, no matter your national heritage, your family heritage, your ethnic heritage, or your linguistic heritage, you are beloved by God in the person you were made to be. When we lay down our life in humility, and no longer make it a point of comparison, to claim anything special, as Jonah tried to do, we can lay down our identity, as Paul did, and pick it up again, letting it be one more thing God uses in us to share God's love with all people from every nation, every tongue, every family group, every political party or whatever humanity uses to divide us.

Let me tell you that this is the gospel perspective: that what is divided in two will become one again in Christ. This, my friends, is truly good news. Amen.