

Jonah and the Whale

Jonah 1, Jonah 2

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Jonah 2:1-10

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

“I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me;

all your waves and your billows passed over me.

Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight;

how shall I look again upon your holy temple?’

The waters closed in over me;

weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land whose bars closed on me forever;

yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.

As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;

and my prayer came to you into your holy temple.

Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.

But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;

What I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the Lord!”

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Jonah thought God had to be kidding. Go to Nineveh and give them an opportunity to repent and to escape God’s judgment? Nineveh was the last place that

Jonah wanted to go. That great city was the capital of Assyria, and Assyria was responsible for the exile and devastation that Jonah's community had experienced for so long. Why in the world would Jonah want to do anything that would help the Ninevites? If anything, he prayed that God would smite them and overthrow the city. Why should Jonah care at all about these people who had caused so much pain for his people?

Forget that. He'd rather die than go to Nineveh.

So Jonah hears God's instruction and then does the exact opposite. Without batting an eyelash, Jonah heads west when God tells him to go east.

That's Jonah for you. He's earned the nickname of "the reluctant prophet" for good reason. God gives him very clear instructions about what to do, where to go, and even offers a reason for why it's important. And then Jonah...well, Jonah doesn't even pretend to obey. Most of us would come up with an elaborate explanation for how we were sure God said go to Tarshish or how we got sidetracked by another very pious purpose that God would've approved of. But not Jonah. Jonah just blatantly disobeys.

This is Jonah's attitude for most of the book. He's not the easiest person for God to work with. With the exception of his somewhat surprisingly sincere prayer that he offers from inside the belly of the fish at the bottom of the sea, the whole book of Jonah is basically banter between an exasperated and eye-rolling minor prophet and an infinitely patient and gracious God.

While most of us are very familiar with Jonah's three day stay in the belly of the whale, many of us have no idea what happens to him post-whale, which is a shame really because it's some of the best comedy in the Bible. If you haven't read chapters 3 and 4 of Jonah, I'd encourage you to find some time this week to do that; I promise you it's worth your time.

In the meantime, here's a quick summary: God gives Jonah a second chance to go to Nineveh and when Jonah delivers the prophesy to the Ninevites that their city will be overthrown if they don't repent, they actually listen to him. This never happens for prophets. Even the king takes Jonah – this stranger in his city – seriously, and he issues a royal decree that all people and all the animals in the city fast and wear sackcloth to show God how very sorry they are for their wickedness. Who knew that pet costumes had their origins in Scripture?

Technically, we could say that this makes Jonah the most successful prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures. What Jeremiah or Isaiah would've given to have such a receptive and compliant audience!

Later, Jonah throws not one but two serious temper tantrums where he claims that he is so angry with God that he just wants to die. Why is he so angry? The first

time it's because God forgives the Ninevites and Jonah just knew that God was going to be merciful and kind like God always is and that is just SO annoying to Jonah. Even though he's benefited from that same divine mercy and kindness himself, Jonah's still angry enough to DIE over how things turned out with the Ninevites.

Jonah has another tantrum when God is kind enough to provide a plant to give Jonah shade and a breeze in the scorching sun and stifling heat of the desert outside the city. When the plant dies, Jonah wants to die too. I say this with all kinds of love for our youth, but Jonah is like the most angsty teenager you've ever met.

It's amusing, yes, but it's also sobering. Jonah's story confronts us with the complexity of human emotions and our relationship with God and with grace in a very real way. Jonah is a complicated person with a story marked by contradictions, missteps, and frustration. And all along the way God continues to make a way for him and to work through him.

I spent the summer of 2009 in prison. I served as a chaplain at Metro State Women's Prison, which was the maximum-security correctional facility in Atlanta, Georgia. Because it was a diagnostic facility, every woman who was sentenced to time in prison in the state of Georgia came through Metro's razor wire fence, metal detectors, and concrete walls, and she went through a series of tests to assess her physical and mental health. The women who had committed the most violent crimes and were considered close security stayed at Metro. So did the women who had severe mental illness, the women who were pregnant, and the women who had serious health issues like cancer and HIV/AIDS.

As you might imagine, I heard a lot of tough stories that summer. Many of the women had done things and experienced things that you'd never wish on anyone. There were stories of anger and stories of revenge, stories of hurt and stories of brokenness, stories of loneliness and stories of desperation.

There was Gayle whose struggle with addiction and string of abusive relationships landed her in prison for drug use and aggravated assault.

There was Iris who came to Metro four months pregnant. The day she went into labor, she didn't want to go to the hospital because she knew she would be separated from her baby after she gave birth.

And there was Sherry who was serving a life sentence and had lived behind bars for the last 40 years of her life.

The women in the prison reminded me a lot of Jonah. They had done things that went against God's desires for them and found themselves living in their own kind of whale belly – far away from their families and from what had been normal life. It was not what they would've chosen for themselves. I don't think it's what God would've chosen for them. But it was, in its own strange way, a space of sanctuary for the women. I didn't say that to them, of course, but as I heard their stories and learned about what many of them had endured in their lives at home, I found myself praying for them that God would use this time to help women like Gayle, Iris, and Sherry to re-center and gain new perspective on God's grace.

For most of us in this sanctuary this morning, our stories don't include prison sentences. But that doesn't mean that our lives are exempt from a season – or seasons – when we feel like we are in the belly of a whale, when we feel like we are very far away from how life should be and when God's plan doesn't seem to make much sense.

Sometimes these seasons come after a deliberate choice that you've made, and sometimes they come with no apparent reason. Maybe for you the belly of the whale is months of unemployment or a difficult year in your marriage. It could be a series of chemo treatments or a persistent sense of purposelessness. It could be your struggle with depression or a broken relationship with someone who was once a close friend.

These seasons are dark and unpleasant, and we sit in them not knowing how long they're going to last or how in the world we will get out. These times when God seems to be an ocean away are disorienting and uncomfortable.

And yet Jonah's story reminds us that God's grace still comes to us in these times.

The poet Dan Albergotti describes the ways that this grace can be recognized in his poem "Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale" -

Measure the walls. Count the ribs. Notch the long days.
 Look up for blue sky through the spout. Make small fires
 with the broken hulls of fishing boats. Practice smoke signals.
 Call old friends, and listen for echoes of distant voices.
 Organize your calendar. Dream of the beach. Look each way
 for the dim glow of light. Work on your reports. Review
 each of your life's ten million choices. Endure moments
 of self-loathing. Find the evidence of those before you.
 Destroy it. Try to be very quiet. Listen for the sound of your heart.
 Be thankful that you are here, swallowed with all hope,
 where you can rest and wait.

If Jonah's time in the belly of the whale is worth our remembering as a community of faith it is because of what that event teaches us about the God we worship: that God is present and active, listening and responding, offering grace and second chances through all the seasons of our lives....the seasons we've crafted for ourselves that look exactly how we imagine they would and the ones that seem incredibly foreign.

The good news, the glimmer of hope that Jonah offers us in spite all of his cynicism and crankiness, is that God can take what to be experiences of almost certain death and turn them into something life-giving. No matter how far we may feel from God – in the belly of the whale at the bottom of the sea, behind bars and razor wire fences, or adrift in the ebb and flow of life – we are never so far from God that God cannot hear our prayers.