

“JONAH: II - STORMS, STRUGGLES AND SECOND CHANCES”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

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Jonah 2

Did any of you happen to see a video clip last week of the fisherman who was fishing and caught a great big fish, it might have been a tuna, and all of a sudden, this huge shark leaps up out of the water right behind him, aiming for that fish? It scared the willies out of me just to watch it on tv. I can't imagine the fear that went through the fisherman!

I thought about that fisherman this week, as I turned to Jonah in chapter 2 of the Book of Jonah. I'll bet he had the willies scared out of him that fateful day on the water too. Tossed overboard by a bunch of frightened sailors who blamed the storm at sea on him - and then, while struggling for his very life, in peril of drowning, he ends up in the belly of a great huge fish - bigger even than that menacing shark. He ends up in the belly of a whale. Scared doesn't seem a big enough word for what Jonah must have been feeling! Petrified is more like it.

Now, in case you weren't here last week, let me go back for a few moments and give you the background to today's story. Jonah was a prophet, a Jew, who lived in the area of Nazareth. One day, God's call came upon his life, and what God was calling him to do was to go to the city of Nineveh to prophesy that God's judgement would come upon it if they didn't stop their evil ways.

Nineveh was a horrible place - a city filled with evil and destruction, and hell bent on having its own way. It plundered nations and people, and the people of Nineveh were unusually cruel and brutal. They hated Jews and Jews hated them, and God was disgusted with the whole lot of Ninevites.

But God's love for them was greater than his disgust with them, so He wanted to give them a chance to repent. So His intent was to send Jonah to Nineveh to prophesy and tell them to change their ways, but Jonah wanted no part of it. For various reasons - fear of the Ninevites, hatred of the Ninevites, and because it seems he just wasn't very interested in following God's plan for his life, Jonah said no. And he didn't just say it, he showed it.

He took off in the opposite direction, hopping on a ship at Joppa, heading off for Tarshish, some two thousand miles away from Nineveh. The ship set sail, Jonah breathed a sigh of relief, he went down into the hold of the ship, and proceeded to fall asleep, and then, literally, all hell broke loose.

A great huge storm whipped up, and it threatened to capsize the ship and take the lives of everyone on board. The sailors figured out that God was mad, and the reason that God was mad was because of Jonah, so they woke him up, and confronted him. And when they did, he admitted it probably was because of him, so they did what they had to do to save themselves and the ship - they tossed him overboard - and lo and behold, the storm ended and the ship went off sailing the calm seas. All was well for them.

Ah, but Jonah, now he was in serious trouble. Thrown in the middle of the sea, miles away from the nearest land, facing certain death. I don't think we can begin to imagine the panic that must have taken over his body. There was no hope, no one around to rescue him, so many possible avenues of danger in that water. Before very long, his strength would fail him, and he would surely drown. For Jonah, it seemed all hope was lost. His obstinance, his disobedience, his desire to call his own shots and turn his back on God's will for his life would be the end of him.

None of us can really know the thoughts and feelings that Jonah was experiencing just then, but one pastor, when thinking about it, recalled a time when his life was in peril on the water, and what it felt like for him. He said he was serving as a youth pastor at the time, and he and some other adults had taken some youth snorkeling in the Florida Keys. While they were snorkeling, he spotted some beautiful coral not far from where the group was swimming, and he left the group to go and investigate it. When he got there he realized the coral was very sharp and close to the surface, and the more he swam over it, the darker it became, and then it seemed the coral reef was never going to end - and he said he began to panic, kicking harder and harder and his breathing became shorter and he started to gasp for air. Finally, blessedly, he finally got out of the reef, but he was amazed at how panicked he had become. (On-line, "Seaweed Prayers," Michael Deutsch)

When I think about Jonah after he was thrown overboard, I kind of think of him that way - panicking, kicking harder and harder to stay afloat, his breathing becoming shorter, him gasping for air. He was hitting bottom. He had messed everything up in the worst possible way, and in his mind, he had to be thinking that surely he was about to die.

And then - whoomph - before he even knows what hits him - out of the water comes a great huge whale with its mouth wide open - and in the blink of an eye - he finds himself inside the belly of that great huge beast. While we look back on this story as Jonah getting rescued, at that moment, I'm thinking Jonah was not thinking that at all. He was probably thinking - this is it! I'm a goner. This is as bad as it gets.

Sadly, in life, sometimes it gets like that. Sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of storms and struggles and we see no way out. Sometimes they are of our own making, and sometimes circumstances just come along and threaten to drown us. And we think - this is as bad as it gets.

I know that more than a few people were thinking that this week. Bombs in Boston, an explosion in Texas - life spirals out of control, evil rears its ugly head on a massive scale - and at times, it feels like we're drowning, and it's as bad as it gets.

For Jonah, the struggle is even more profound because he knows he brought the trouble on himself. He was the one who turned away from God. He was the one who said no to God, and thought he knew better what to do with his life than God did. So now, he's hit bottom and he has no one to blame but himself.

What was he to do? And what are we to do, when we find ourselves in storms and struggles, whether they are of our own making, or not? Well, I think in this case, we are to do what Jonah ended up doing - and that is, throwing himself on the mercy of God and praying like his life depended upon it - because it did.

You know, I once heard a story about three pastors having a conversation about prayer, and the best way to pray. As they were having this conversation, a telephone repairman was nearby working on a phone system. At any rate, the first pastor said that the key to praying was in the hands. And he held his hands together in the posture of prayer, and lifted them towards heaven. The second pastor said that no, the real way to pray was on your knees. Then the third pastor chimed in - "No, you both have it wrong. The best way to pray is to lie down flat, with your face on the ground." By this time, the telephone repairman couldn't keep quiet any longer, and he said to the three, "I don't know about you guys, but the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended 40 feet above the ground." (Ibid)

He was onto something, wasn't he? Jonah knew that, and some of you know that as well. That in the toughest times of your life, you've prayed the hardest. The great preacher of the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon once said that "most of the grand truths of God have to be learned by trouble; they must be burned unto us with the hot iron of affliction, otherwise we shall not truly receive them. No man is competent to judge in matters of the kingdom, until first he has been tried; since there are many things to be learned in the depths which we can never know in the heights." (On-line, The Spurgeon Archive, Sermon delivered May 10, 1857)

It was in the depths of despair and the grips of fear, that Jonah turned to God in fervent prayer. He called the Lord out of his distress. He recounted the journey he had taken, the struggles he was undergoing. He admitted that it was his own fault, and then, most importantly of all, he remembered that it was God who loved him. It was God who could forgive him. It was God who could rescue

him. It was God who could set him on his feet again. He praised God and poured out his trust that God would deliver him.

When he was holding on to life by a thread, Jonah prayed and prayed and prayed.

This week, while I was writing this sermon, I came upon a little poem that I read to you a number of years ago, but I want to read it again today because I think it's a reminder of what Jonah did and what we can do in times of storm and struggle.

It's the poem about the two frogs. Do you remember it?

Two frogs fell into a can of cream - or so I've heard it told.
The sides of the can were shiny and steep, the cream was deep and cold.
"Oh, what's the use?" said number one, "tis fate - no help's around -
Goodbye, my friend! Goodbye, sad world!" And weeping still, he drowned.

But number two, of sterner stuff, dog-paddled in surprise,
the while he wiped his creamy face and dried his creamy eyes.
"I'll swim awhile, at least" he said - or so it has been said -
"It wouldn't really help the world, if one more frog was dead."

An hour or two he kicked and swam - not once he stopped to mutter,
but kicked and swam, and swam and kicked, then hopped out, via butter."
(On-line, "The Road Back to God," Mike Leiter)

A cute poem, but nevertheless, it holds a very real truth, one which Jonah seemed to grasp - kick and swim, and pray, pray, pray - with every part of your being. In times of storm and struggle, whatever the cause, pray without ceasing. Jonah did that, and God heard his prayers, and delivered him back to dry land, back to life, back to begin again. God gave Jonah a second chance.

Dear friends, I know that there are people here this day who are in the midst of storms and struggles. I know all of us have had a bad week, just living with the events of the week. In a very real way, we're all a bit like Jonah today.

So my prayer is that we will learn from his story, from his struggle. That whether our struggles are personal, or societal, or both, we pray and pray and pray some more. That we never give up, because we know that God never does. That we remember and trust in God's grace, which is always there, and always for us. That we believe that God wants what is best for us, and will always make a way, even when we can't see it. That if we confess our sins, God will forgive us, and set us on our feet again. And that God is the God of second chances, and third

chances, and fourth chances, and on and on and on.

You know, this chapter of Jonah is, in the end, a chapter about God's grace. It starts with grace and ends with grace. I don't think Jonah thought ending up in a whale's belly was an act of God's grace - but it was. God rescued him, when He could have, by all rights, let Jonah drown because of his disobedience. But God saved him, and put him in such a place where he could come to himself, and turn back to God. And at the end of the chapter, that is exactly what he's done. He's got a fresh start. He's standing safe and sound on dry land. God has delivered him to new life.

And my friends, that's the Good News of the Gospel. When we turn to God, confess our sins, trust in His goodness and mercy, through Jesus Christ our Lord, He delivers us to new life. Thanks be to God.

Amen.