

Sermon Jonah: Prayers from the Belly of the Whale January 21, 2018

Then Jonah prayed to his God from the belly of the fish. He prayed: "In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God. The Lord answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried, 'Help!' You heard my cry. You threw me into ocean's depths, into a watery grave, with ocean waves, ocean breakers crashing over me. I said, 'I've been thrown away, thrown out, out of Your sight. I'll never again lay eyes on Your Holy Temple.' Ocean gripped me by the throat. The ancient Abyss grabbed me and held tight. My head was all tangled in seaweed at the bottom of the sea where the mountains take root. I was as far down as a body can go, and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever - Yet You pulled me up from that grave alive, O God, my God! When my life was slipping away I remembered God, and my prayer got through to You, made it all the way to Your Holy Temple. Those who worship hollow gods, god-frauds, walk away from their only true love. But I'm worshipping You, God, calling out in thanksgiving! And I'll do what I promised I'd do! Salvation belongs to God!" Jonah 2

This past week I was at Mt. Hermon Conference Center in Scott Valley for three days at the "Gathering of the Orders", which is a meeting of all the United Methodist clergy in the California Nevada Conference, the District Superintendents, and Bishop Carcaño. I was the worship leader for our times of worship, and because our guest speaker was using the book of Jonah as his scripture, I based the worship around it. I've loved rereading this short and improbable story of the prophet who ran away from God's call, was thrown overboard and swallowed by a fish, and who finally did what God commanded him to do, but kicking and biting all the way. Jews read the book of Jonah on Rosh Oshana and Yom Kippur because of its theme of repentance. Lent is the Christian season of repentance and it's almost here: on Ash Wednesday, which is Valentine's Day. This bible story which is read on holy days of repentance is mostly about God's mercy. Interestingly in this story it's not the run-away prophet Jonah who repents, but the people he despises and has run away from helping.

Last week we heard the first chapter of this book, and Jonah's refusal to obey God's call to go to the people of Ninevah, to warn them to repent, to avoid God's wrath.

Jonah did hear God's call to go to Ninevah, but he instead boarded a ship going to Tarshish, in Spain, which was in the opposite direction from Ninevah. During the voyage there was a violent storm, and all the crew prayed to their own gods. Finally Jonah admitted to them that he worshipped the true God, who made the seas and the dry land, and they came to realize that Jonah was running away from God and was the cause of the storm. So they threw Jonah overboard and he was swallowed by a large fish. This is where we pick up the story today, and where we must suspend disbelief - if we're going to take this story seriously, and learn from it - we've got to suspend disbelief that a man could live in the belly of a fish for three days.

Jonah ran away from the call to serve God, to warn the Ninevites of God's wrath. He ignored God, and yet in the belly of the fish that swallowed him, Jonah spent three days in prayer, in conversation with the God he was running from. This is a commentary on humanity: we ignore or dismiss God's call on our lives but when we're in the depths of despair, in the belly of the whale, we cry out to God for help. And God responds. This isn't to say that God delivers answer to prayer like an ATM machine delivers \$20-dollar bills. It's to say that God responds to us... with love, with mercy, with comfort, and with God's own presence. Since our early days as Methodist Christians, we've been taught to avail ourselves of God's grace... and that instead of taking a relationship with the Lord for granted, instead we are to practice the means of grace... we are to develop a relationship with God and practice our faith to strengthen that relationship and to reap the benefits of it. John Wesley referred to this as "standing in the doorway" of God's grace, taking advantage of God's grace and presence and tender love that showers down on us.

Jonah would eventually confess to God that he ran from God's call to warn the Ninevites because he knew God; he knew God's mercy and lovingkindness, and he didn't want the Ninevites - enemies of the Israelites... and as far from the Chosen People of God as Ninevah and Tarshish were - Jonah didn't want them to be spared. Jonah was an advocate of the strict justice of God, of sin rightly punished. But in the belly of the whale Jonah prayed for his own deliverance; he prayed to be spared. And he prayed this because he knew God's mercy. Jonah, who had wished for the Ninevites to experience God's wrath for their violence and wickedness – but now he found himself in the belly of death, praying for God's mercy. This story of Jonah is a change in how the Israelites understood God (or maybe it was an invitation for them to understand differently) that God loves and chooses to save all the world, not just the “chosen”, not just the righteous, but all the world. God had compassion on the Ninevites, as God has compassion on us, on all the world, even our enemies. This is one of the lessons from the story of Jonah, but it's next week's lesson... this morning is about praying from the belly of the whale.

We learn three lessons today from Jonah's prayer in the belly of the whale: **Prayer changes our perspective. God is in control. And** (this is the hard one) **God is always merciful.** A prophet is someone who comes so close to God, and God comes so close to them, that they know what God wants them to do and they do it. Jonah refused to obey God's call to go to Ninevah and tell the people to repent, and he ran away from not just Ninevah, but from God. When Jonah was thrown overboard he prayed: “In trouble, in deep trouble, I prayed to God. The Lord answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried ‘Help!’ and You, Lord, heard my cry... My head was all tangled

in seaweed at the bottom of the sea where the mountains take root. I was as far down as a body can go, and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever... Yet You pulled me up from the grave alive, O God!"

Prayer changes our perspective. Say with me, **"Prayer... can change... my perspective."** Prayer is an attitude of vulnerability. Sometimes prayer is a "to-do" list for God; a list of circumstances we need changed, or people we need changed, and we implore God to see the problem from our perspective and fix it. You and I might not admit that we use prayer this way but most of us do. We pray to change God's mind. We pray for God to do what we desperately need done. Sometimes prayer can be a lament. Many of the psalms are laments, songs of grief and pain and regret. Psalm 11:3 asks, "When the very bottom of things falls out, what can a righteous person do?" Jonah was a righteous person - up to this time he'd been a righteous man - but he had hit bottom, literally; he was at the bottom of the sea in the bottom of the belly of a big fish. He was away from his home, away from the ministry he'd been called to. He had no future, no security, and nothing but death to look forward to. So he prayed, maybe from Psalm 11: "In the Lord, I take refuge." Jonah became more serious about prayer... because he found himself with no other options. But what if before you find yourself in the belly of the whale you develop a prayer life? What if you take seriously the invitation from God to be in a relationship that needs tending, that needs love, and commitment from you? What if you set aside time every day to listen to God, to speak with God in your heart, and to look for signs of God? We will all find ourselves at sometime in our lives in the belly of the whale. The bottom falls out of a relationship; the bottom falls out at a doctor's diagnosis; the bottom falls out of our sense of national security; the bottom

falls out of the economy; the bottom falls out of a job or a dream... we will all at sometime find ourselves at the bottom in the belly of the whale.

What do we do? We pray what we know best. Some of the prayers you say might be swear words like OMG! ... so work to change that, so that in the belly of the whale your prayer comforts you and draws you close to God. Remember and recite scripture. Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me" or Romans 8: 38 & 39 "Nothing can separate me from God's love in Christ Jesus my Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing else in all creation." Jonah's prayer of lament in the belly of the whale changed and became a song of praise. "You pulled me up from that grave alive... When my life was slipping away, I remembered God, and my prayer got through to You... I'm worshipping You, God, calling out in thanksgiving!" In the belly of the fish Jonah prayed... first in desperation and then in thanksgiving. In the belly of the fish - with nowhere to go, nothing to look forward to, no hope - Jonah prayed, and it changed his perspective. In the Godly Play curriculum the story says, "Jonah began to pray, and the fish began to feel very strange. It grew sicker and sicker and. Finally, it swam to shore and vomited Jonah onto the dry land." Prayer can loosen the hold of despair, or grief, or hopelessness, or fear, or whatever has caused us to sink into the belly of the whale - causing it to release us onto dry land, like Jonah was released. A lesson we learn from Jonah is (say it with me) **"Prayer... will change... my perspective."**

A second lesson from Jonah is that God is in control. Say it with me: **God... is in control.** This is different than the Calvinist view that God causes everything. In the story

of Jonah God gave Jonah, who was one of God's prophets, a message to deliver to the Ninevites. "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to My attention." But Jonah ran away from the call... and so God directed the storm. God steered the boat into the storm. God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah, so he wouldn't drown in the sea. In each of these scenarios God took control. One of the lessons from last week is: God persists. That's what I mean by "God is in control." God doesn't give up. God doesn't give up God's plans, God doesn't give up on us. Jonah seems lost in the belly of the fish, but God persisted in holding onto Jonah, even there. God caused the fish to vomit Jonah onto the dry land... because God had given Jonah a call to ministry, and Jonah hadn't done it. God is persistent. God is a God of second and third and one hundred and third chances. When we get it wrong, when we disobey, or run away, or ignore God's call to serve, God persists. Because God... is in control.

This morning in the worship program is a list of our lay ministers... lay meaning "of the people". A lay minister is everyone in the church who serves, other than ordained pastors. Peter wrote about this in his letter to the early church (1Peter 2) "You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do God's work and speak out for Christ." This call to ministry is for all believers; it's a call from God to each of us, to do God's work of helping to heal the world, of helping to build God's kingdom of love and justice, and inclusion and peace, and of helping to reveal God in the world. We are all called by God to do this work. On New Year's Eve morning we observed John Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service, recommitting our lives to Jesus Christ. This is from one of the prayers from that

Sunday. “Let us gathered here before the Lord now in covenant commit ourselves to Christ as His servants. Let us give ourselves to Him so that we may fully belong to Him. Jesus Christ has left us with many services to be done. Some of these services are easy and honorable, but some are difficult and disgraceful. Some line up with our desires and interests, others are contrary to both. In some we please both Christ and ourselves, but then there are other works where we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.”

Every Sunday and at most of the ministry team meetings, we pray the Lord's Prayer, in which we pray that God's Kingdom will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God's call to us is to help bring the kingdom to earth. And because this is God's will, God's desire, that God's Kingdom come on earth, God persists in calling us and using us to fulfill God's plan. God is in control... and whether it looks to you like the world is spiraling out of control... God is still in control. God is still calling you and me to do the work of welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, and loving the unlovely. When you are in the belly of the whale and it feels like your life purpose is unclear, your head is tangled in seaweed, and nothing you do seems to matter... pray. And then expect God to give that whale a stomach ache so that you'll be expelled onto dry land, and able to obey God's call to love, to serve, to heal, and to reveal God. One of the lessons from Jonah is (say it with me) **God... is in control.**

The third lesson from this chapter of Jonah is: God... is always merciful. Say it with me: **God is... always merciful.** This was the bitterest thing for Jonah to swallow - more bitter than mouthfuls of sea water - because he didn't want the Ninevites to

experience God's mercy. Ninevah, we heard last Sunday, was the capitol of Assyria, who was known for their brutality, and was responsible for the annihilation of the northern kingdom of Israel. Ninevah is mentioned by the prophet Nahum as a place of wickedness and godlessness. Jonah had no desire to go to that sinful city, about 60 miles away and a three-day walk, and tell them to repent.

But as we've learned, as Jonah had to learn, God is in control, and what God desires is salvation for all people. "Shalom" is the word used for what God desires for all creation, and it's much more than peace. It's a word that means completeness, soundness, welfare, safety, health, and peace. The president of our country has made comments about nations who are our enemies, and who are undesirable, which is how Jonah viewed the Ninevites. This is a human perspective - that some of us are better and more deserving than others - but it's not God's perspective. In the story of Jonah, the "heathen", the outsiders, and foreigners, both the crew of the boat sailing for Tarshish and the Ninevites, were more obedient and more in awe of God than God's prophet, Jonah, was. The sailors threw Jonah overboard and then when the storm immediately ceased, they worshipped God. And the Ninevites, when they heard of God's displeasure, repented, from the king and queen, the story says, to the animals in the field. God had no favorites... no partiality... God was looking for vulnerable, open hearts, lives willing to be changed, and opportunities to be merciful.

It turns out that mercy is more important to God than justice. This is bitter for us to swallow, like it was for Jonah. We'd like to see our enemies brought down. We'd like to see the wrath of God dispensed in appropriate places. That's our human perspective... but it's not God's. God is always merciful.

This isn't a sermon about repentance, but repentance is an important theme in the book of Jonah, as repentance is an important theme in the Christian life. To repent means to turn around... and how we "turn around" from sin and wrong-doing is to pray for forgiveness, to pray for God's perspective of our sinfulness, and to ask Christ Jesus to forgive us. And He does because... God is always merciful.

I think praying for God's mercy is more difficult in personal relationships than on a global level. Because we can turn off the news and tune out the political reports. But face to face with someone who dislikes you, or wishes you harm, is just painful. Prayer, fortunately, can change us. A good prayer for your adversaries is, "Bless them, Lord." Sometimes it's appropriate to add, "And change me." Thank God that God is always merciful! God doesn't give you and me what we deserve... but instead we are given unconditional love, extravagant forgiveness, and the call to be in ministry to all the world. Because God loves us... (say it with me) **God is... always merciful.**

The last two chapters of Jonah are hilariously funny, as we'll hear next Sunday. Jonah is a lousy prophet who runs away, and then obeys God, and then has second thoughts and sulks, and then gets angry with God. Come back next week and hear how God deals with Jonah... come and find yourself in this bible story, where we've learned that prayer can change our perspective; that God is in control, and that God is always merciful. Amen.