

WHEN LIFE THROWS YOU OVERBOARD, IT'S TIME FOR SERIOUS THINKING

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Oct. 30, 2016

Based on Jonah 1 and 2

The sermon this morning is the continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” We have considered during this series a number of Biblical stories about people on ships encountering stormy seas—from the story of Noah through the story of the disciples in a storm on the Sea of Galilee to the story of Paul caught in a raging storm during his voyage to Rome. Today we are looking at a story of a sea voyage where things go really badly for the central character—the story of Jonah. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

God called Jonah to head east to preach to the city of Nineveh. [*The word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, “Arise, go to the great city of Nineveh, and preach to it.” Jonah 1:1-2*] Jonah got on a boat heading west. This is not a good beginning.

Jonah is sometimes called the “reluctant prophet.” He did not want to preach to the city of Nineveh, because he did not like the people of Nineveh, and for good reason. Nineveh, located near what is now the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, was the capital of the ancient empire of Assyria, and Assyria had a brutal history of oppressing the people of Israel. The Assyrians, in Jonah’s mind, were the bad guys of the world, and he was not interested in telling them about the love and mercy of God. What he really wanted was for God to send fire and brimstone upon them. So when God called him to go and preach to Nineveh, he got on a ship for Tarshish, [*Jonah found a ship going to Tarshish. Jonah 1:3*] in Spain, going precisely the opposite direction.

But God is merciful, which means that God chases after us when we are running away from God. In Jonah’s case, God sent a storm after the ship on which he was traveling, and we heard the story of how the ship was in great distress. Jonah was trying to ignore it all—human beings often try to ignore God—but he was finally confronted by the sailors, who found that he was the reason they were all in such trouble. Jonah confessed what he was doing, and the sailors tossed him overboard.

Here is where the big fish comes in—the favorite part of the story for children. This is one of several elements of the story which tell us that maybe we are not supposed to be reading this as a literal, historical account. Maybe this story is more of an Old Testament parable—a story which is really about all of us and how we often run away from God’s call and end up in a mess. I’ll leave it for you to decide whether you want to think of this story as historical or as a figurative parable; what is important is that we hear the lasting message that the story is intended to communicate to us.

Jonah in the story is swallowed up by the big fish. The Hebrew here—*dag גדול*—means not whale but big fish. It may seem a bad thing to be swallowed by a fish, but in this case Jonah was about to drown in the middle of the Mediterranean, so the fish is, in an ironic sense, a rescue vehicle of God. Jonah ends up in the belly of the fish.

Now is a time for some serious thinking. Jonah is forced to really ponder his spiritual condition and how he got to this point in life. It is at this juncture that the story can connect with our own spiritual journey; for there are times in life when the events of life throw us overboard—when we hit some serious trouble that thoroughly disrupts our life journey. Such a time is uncomfortable. Yet it may be precisely such a time that moves us to look anew to God and to discover afresh God’s presence and guidance for life.

In Jonah’s case, he came to recognize that he had been wrong to flee from God and avoid God’s call. He began to pray. We heard that prayer in Jonah chapter two. It is a prayer of repentance in which Jonah recognizes his need for God and turns to God for God’s deliverance.

You likely can identify with that prayer if you have ever had a time of serious trouble. “The waters closed in over me,” says Jonah, “the deep surrounded me.” [Jonah 2:5] We may feel overwhelmed at times by difficulty or guilt. “But as my life was ebbing away,” says Jonah, “I remembered the Lord. My prayer rose to God’s holy temple . . . I will fulfill my vows to you, O God. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” [Jonah 2:7.9] Jonah’s prayer summons us to look to God for renewal and deliverance, and to commit ourselves afresh to God.

In the end, Jonah experienced God’s saving power. As the story unfolds, God commands the fish, and it spits Jonah back out onto dry land. [*The Lord commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. Jonah 2:10*] By God’s grace Jonah gets a new beginning. So what happens next? It often happens in life that people will make great promises to God when they are in the belly of the fish, so to speak, but they don’t really change. This was the case with Jonah. Jonah had learned not to run away from God, so he went to the city of Nineveh, as God had called him. But his heart did not change; he still did not really care about the people of Nineveh and had no interest in being a part of some gracious plan of God to save them. So Jonah walked to the center of the city, [*Jonah went into the city of Nineveh . . . Jonah 3:4a*] where he halfheartedly proclaimed the message that God had told him to proclaim; he warned the people that if they did not repent and turn from their evil ways, great destruction would fall on their city. [*And Jonah proclaimed, “Forty more days of this, and Nineveh shall be overthrown! Jonah 3:4b*] Then Jonah walked back out of the city, where he took a seat in some shade, and waited for the fire and brimstone to fall. Jonah did not think the people would repent, and he did not want them to repent; he really hoped that God would just fry this wicked city of Nineveh.

But, as the story of Jonah goes on into chapters 3 and 4, the people of Nineveh did repent, so that God spared their city from judgment. [*When God saw how they changed from their evil ways, God turned from the calamity that would have come upon them. Jonah 3:10*] And that made Jonah really mad. [*And Jonah became angry. Jonah 4:1*] The story continues with Jonah exclaiming, “O Lord! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled to Spain at the beginning; for I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from

punishing.” [Jonah 4:2] In other words, Jonah was saying, “I knew it, I knew it, O God. I knew that you were going to let these people off the hook, which is why I did not want to come here in the first place.” Jonah went off and sulked.

Outside the city, Jonah found some respite in the shade of a bush. [*A bush gave shade over Jonah’s head, so Jonah was very happy about the bush. Jonah 4:6*] The bush itself was a gift of God, but then God made the bush wither, so that the sun beat down on Jonah [*God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered . . . and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah Jonah 4:7-8*] And Jonah really complained about the withered bush and all this heat and his discomfort and frustration, which leads to the climax of the story, where God says to Jonah, “You are concerned about this bush, for which you did not labor . . . Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred twenty thousand people . . . and also many animals?” [Jonah 4:10-11]

Thus ends the book of Jonah, with a question—a question directed straight at us. We often are concerned about our troubles and our frustrations and pains, which may be considerable; but should we not be concerned all the more about the great needs and pains of the world around us? Like Jonah, we are called to turn from self-concern to a godly concern for others, so that we can be a part of God’s answer to a troubled and hurting world; and in this respect the story of Jonah lifts up three key aspects of God’s call to each of us.

Like Jonah, we are called to genuinely care about other people, including people who are not like us, even people we might be inclined to dislike. The story of Jonah is in fact is an Old Testament foretaste of the teaching of Jesus that we are to love even our enemies. Jesus referred specifically to the story of Jonah when he said that the people of his day would be given the “sign of Jonah.” [*“The sign given to his generation will be the sign of Jonah.” Matthew 12:39*] The sign of Jonah is on the one hand the Resurrection—that just as Jonah emerged alive after three days in the belly of the fish, so Jesus would arise after three days in the tomb. [*As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Matthew 12:40*] But the sign of Jonah is also the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles [*The people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now One greater than Jonah is here. Matthew 12:41*]—the fact that just as Jonah took God’s message of grace (albeit unwillingly) to people way beyond his own circle, so the followers of Jesus would take the message of Jesus to people all over the world, even people they had formerly disliked and distrusted. The difference was that the followers of Jesus took the message of God’s love to the world enthusiastically, with a genuine concern for people who were quite different from themselves. We likewise are to reach out with the love of God to all.

The story of Jonah also calls us to commit ourselves significantly to God’s mission. Jonah was called to make a major commitment of time, money, and effort to take God’s Word to Nineveh. He preferred to expend his time, money, and effort on a vacation in Spain. We have the same sort of challenge today as to where we will devote our resources.

The story of Jonah, in calling us to make a significant commitment to God's purposes, ties in with the Biblical principle of the tithe, which calls us to give 10% of our annual income to God's work. If you give 10% of your income to God, you are doing far more than most people do, since the average household in America gives 2 to 3 percent of income to charity. But of course, the call embodied in the book of Jonah is precisely this kind of challenge—the challenge to go beyond the ordinary, to commit ourselves in a profound way to make a difference in the world.

In all this, the story of Jonah calls us to trust in God. It is our connection with God that will enable us to see past our troubles to catch God's larger vision for life. It is our connection with God that enables us to truly love people who are far beyond us, and it is our connection with God that inspires us finally to give significantly of ourselves. Today we have an opportunity to respond to God's call by making a financial commitment to the work of Christ through this church in the coming year. May we respond to that call, not like Jonah, but as followers of Jesus, that we may join with the Spirit of God to be in mission for Christ to all the world.