

Sermon 3-7-10¹
Matthew 7:1-11
Jonah 2:1-10
Praying from the Belly

From our way of looking at things, Jonah should have died when he was tossed into the water. Sitting out there, bobbing on the sea, slowly succumbing to the waves as they crashed over his head. As Jonah sinks further and further down his breath begins to give out. His head is tangled with seaweed and the churning of the water disorients him. As he sinks down, I wonder what was going through his mind. I wonder if he thought to himself, "This is what I deserve for running away. This is what happens to prodigal prophets who try to flee from God's presence. This is what happens when I fail." Maybe he thought, "Where did I go wrong; how did I get to this point; why did I let myself fail so miserably?" While I wonder about his experience of drowning, there can be no mistake about his experience when the deliverance and salvation of the Lord was revealed to him.

At the beginning of Jonah's story, we were given a glimpse of a prodigal prophet fed up with God's ministry. Hearing the Word of the Lord, Jonah attempted to run away from the Lord's presence, attempting to put some distance between himself and God's call. I imagine that Jonah felt everything in his life was going along just fine. Why should traveling to Nineveh, that great and wicked Gentile city, ruin his day? We heard Jonah's trials on the boat; his willful resistance to prayer and petition. Like a rebellious teenager, Jonah wanted to make it on his own, wanted to experience life away from his God. There was a point when Jonah couldn't be bothered to pray. There was a point when Jonah wanted nothing to do with prayer. Why pray to the Lord God Almighty when he calls you to such an

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unspeakable place of horror to deal with a people who are as bloodthirsty as they come? Jonah wouldn't pray, he was fine saying, "No thanks God!" Lucky for him, God's grace and love doesn't take no for an answer.

When Jonah is tossed from the boat, left to die there in the water, he should have died; his life should have gone all the way to the depths of Sheol. From our way of looking at things, he deserved as much. Yet, out of the freedom of his love and grace, the Lord God Almighty provided a fish for Jonah; a large fish to swallow him up and deliver him from the looming specter of death. In that moment, Jonah's life was redeemed by his God; not by anything he was able to do but out of the freedom of God's love. Salvation was known in the belly of this great fish. Following his deliverance and salvation, the prodigal prophet repented of his disobedience. Jonah recognized how underserved God's grace and mercy were and yet here he was redeemed by the Lord's own hand. And from out of the depths of his renewed vision, Jonah was able to do something he had not done in some time. He prayed.

Only from within the belly of the great fish is Jonah able to recognize God's grace, mercy, and care. It's amazing what gastric juices can do. Despite all his attempts to flee from God's presence and escape from God's claims upon his life, Jonah is still held precious in God's sight. From within the belly, Jonah confesses that despite all his attempts to evade the Lord, despite his lack of love for God, nevertheless it is God himself who has brought him up from the Pit. When the waters closed in over him; when the deep surrounded him; when the weeds were wrapped around his head, it is the Lord who acts decisively for Jonah's salvation. And in response to this act of God's grace and mercy, Jonah becomes a new person. No longer is he the prodigal prophet trying to run away; he sees the salvation

of the Lord that was held out to him all along and responds to it. Yet he was only able to recognize it from within the belly of the beast. Jonah's prayer reflects the reality that he is a redeemed man—and not by anything he was able to do, but only through the salvation that belongs to the Lord God Almighty.

Times of distress are always revealing. When things in life are going along smoothly, it seems that most people move through their day-to-day lives without giving much notice to the things happening around them. Yet, when distress occurs, either self-induced or world-induced, suddenly people are interested in God, in the plight of the afflicted, and want to use whatever means necessary to get back to the status quo when everything was hunky-dory. In times of distress, we begin to wonder why God has afflicted us, why God has caused some tragedy, why God stands aloof while the world goes to hell in a hand basket. But do we ever stop to think that God is with us in the midst of distress, that God's grace and mercy are there before our eyes and maybe we just can't recognize it cause we refuse to see it; in the midst of distress do we remember that deliverance, salvation belongs to the Lord!

Sometimes we carry dueling pictures of God around in our heads that are completely asinine. On the one hand, we carry around this image of god as the aloof grandfather, sitting on his recliner somewhere up there, just waiting to hand out candy to his grandchildren as long as they ask politely. It's an image of god that is disinterested in the plight of the world, an image that tells us to wait it out and everything will be just fine when we leave this bodily existence. On the other hand, we carry this image of god as the wrathful and vengeful god who's always out to get us for our sins; who's always standing there with a checklist waiting for us to screw up so he can sadistically punish us and throw

our lives into distress. This is the god who makes viciously high demands for us and then when we fail, condemns us—stacking the deck before we ever get a chance. Both of these images are lies, are seeds sown by the principalities and powers that distort the vision of God as he reveals himself to us.

I will forever cherish a story recounted from the battlefields of WWII by one of my favorite teachers in the faith, Tom Torrance. Torrance was a chaplain in the British army, couched in one of the battlefields in France. Witnessing a young soldier being shot, Torrance ran over to him. Knowing that the young man did not have that much longer to live, Torrance stayed with him. The young man looked up and said, “Pastor, is Jesus really like God?” Torrance smiled and looked at him, “Son, when you are staring into the face of Jesus, you are staring into the face of God.” For all the doubts and anxiety, those moments of distress might bring, Jonah’s prayer from the belly reminds us who God is. God is the God of salvation, of deliverance, of love and mercy, the God who bears with his people, and the God who so loved the world that he penetrated into the depths of it in, through and as Jesus Christ; not to condemn but to bear the judgment of sin within his own life and redeem creation.

We don’t worship an impersonal god who’s just “dying” to send people to hell. We worship the Lord God Almighty who deals with us vulnerably and personally in and through Jesus Christ, who dies to set us free from the power of sin and death, and delivers us from the belly of Sheol. The good news of great joy is Jesus Christ. He is God’s movement of love and grace and mercy and deliverance to us. He is God’s affirmation and pledge that we don’t live on our own, we don’t have to check our pulses to see if we’re saved or forgiven, and we don’t have to wonder if there is some god out there waiting to zap us. We

are called to realize what Jonah realized from within the belly: we are not left on our own, we are not forgotten, we are not forsaken.

With Jonah we can be assured that in the midst of our distress we can lift our voices to the Lord. With Jonah we can be assured that God will answer. “What is your only comfort, in life and in death,” asks Heidelberg Catechism. “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven no a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit the purpose for my salvation.” These aren’t vain and empty words; they are centered in the assurance that Jesus Christ is God’s pledge of faithfulness to us, that he is God-with-us here and now who binds our lives to his own, so that no matter what belly we are found within—whether a great fish, the distress of disaster, a broken marriage, the death of a loved one, or the failure of our bodies—no matter what belly we are found within we might know the grace, mercy, and love of our Lord for he has made our life his own, and he delivers. He joins us in union with himself and abides in us so that whenever we find ourselves in the belly of sin and the work of the evil one, we can raise up our voices in prayer and praise, confident that God hears our cries because he has made our lives his own. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.