

“Reflection and Repentance”
Sermon Series on the book of Jonah
Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes
First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(Jonah 1:17-2:9)

Introduction.

Last Sunday I talked about six-word biographies, and I shared with you that John Ortberg wrote a six-word summary of Jonah’s life – “No!” Storm. Overboard. Fish. Regurgitated. Yes!” This past week someone in our church sent me a link to one of John’s sermons which included his rather unusual depiction of God’s call and the prophet’s refusal. You may not know this, but John Ortberg is a big Dr. Seuss fan, and occasionally he likes to speak in Dr. Seuss verse. For example:

Could you, would you go to preach?
Could you, would you go to reach
The people in Assyria?
For you fit my criteria.

I would not go there in a boat.
I would not go there in a float.

I would not go there in a gale.
I would not go there in a whale.

I do not like the people there.
If they all died, I would not care.

I will not go to that great town,
I’d rather choke. I’d rather drown.

I will not go by land or sea.
So, stop this talk and let me be!¹

Pretty creative, don’t you think?

Last week we looked at Jonah’s refusal of the Lord’s call to go to Nineveh, his booking passage on a ship to Tarshish, and his attempt to run from the Lord. We also noted God’s pursuing love that would not let the prophet go. This morning we’ll continue our study, and today we’ll look at what happened in Jonah’s life when the Lord rescued him from the ocean and gave him some time to think and

reflect on his life.

I. A Divine Appointment.

The sailors tossed Jonah overboard, at the encouragement of the prophet, and the Bible tells us that the sea became completely calm. And then it says the sailors worshipped the Lord and made vows to Him. Despite Jonah's reluctance, his evangelistic mission was blessed by God, and people came to know the Lord. Then at the end of chapter 1 we read, "*And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the great fish three days and three nights*" (1:17).

The text tells us that God "appointed" a great fish to swallow the prophet. The verb that is used here for "appoint" appears several times in the book of Jonah. For example, we see it when God appointed a great wind and caused a violent storm to rise up in chapter 1, or later on in chapter 4 when God appointed a plant to grow and then die. In each case, God orchestrated a circumstance in order to teach Jonah something the prophet desperately needed to realize or to learn.

Look back over your life. Can you see the fingerprints of God orchestrating the people and events in ways that impacted you? Often times the most important lessons I've learned in my life have been the result of a divine appointment God had for me? And often these appointments involved some adversity. Is that true in your life, too? On many occasions there are events that happen which are difficult or even excruciating at the time, but later on they yield more good than you could have ever imagined.

Many years ago Sheldon Vanauken wrote a book entitled *A Severe Mercy*. It's an autobiographical account that tells the love story of Sheldon's relationship with his wife, their friendship with C.S. Lewis, his conversion to Christianity, and then the sad and tragic death of Sheldon's wife who died of strange virus just a few months after diagnosis. It's a story of tragedy and triumph and faith. C.S. Lewis became a good conversation partner for Vanauken because he, too, lost his wife prematurely, and both Lewis and Vanauken talked about this idea of God's severe mercy.

In a letter C.S. Lewis wrote that he believed Vanauken's struggles after his wife's death had their root to some extent in the fact that he had made an idol of love, and it was killing his faith. Lewis wrote, "You have been treated with a severe mercy." It was the death of Vanauken's wife that eventually led him to a deeper and more vibrant faith, and later on Vanauken himself was able to write concerning his wife's passing, "That death, so full of suffering for both of us, was yet a severe mercy. A mercy as severe as death, and a severity as merciful as love."

The great fish who swallowed Jonah is a perfect example of a severe mercy. Obviously, God saved Jonah's life by having the fish rescue him from the ocean, but he was still in the belly of a fish. He was trapped in a watery prison, and he was far from help and far from hope.

Whenever we reject God and disobey Him, often it takes something radical to get our attention and cause us to change direction. And without this interruption, without this severe mercy as Lewis called it, we aren't open to change. So, God sends a divine appointment our way which is sometimes painful, but in the end it proves to be just what we needed. All of a sudden God has our attention, and we're all ears.

Are you experiencing a severe mercy right now yourself? Do you feel like you're in the belly of a great fish, so to speak? What is happening in in your life that is tearing your world apart, and how might God want to use it as a divine appointment to try and get your attention? Are you listening, and are you open to making a change?

II. A Prayer of Repentance.

In the case of Jonah the time in the belly of the great fish proved to be just what the prophet needed. It gave him an opportunity to reflect on his life, his refusal of God, and how he was running away from the Lord. And in the end the time of confinement led to a profound prayer of repentance. The text tells us Jonah prayed, *"In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and You listened to my cry"* (Jonah 2:2).

Note that Jonah didn't pray to God at all prior to his journey, or while he was running from the Lord, until he ended up in the belly of the fish. But there, after the prophet had gone down, down, down, to place of desperation in a fish in the sea, Jonah voiced a prayer to God. If you study it closely, the prayer Jonah prayed wasn't a spontaneous original self-expression. The words were completely derived from the book of Psalms. Jonah had been to Hebrew school, and he learned how to pray by reading the Psalms. Line by line Jonah's prayer is filled with the vocabulary of the psalm writers in the OT.

We tend to think that prayer is more authentic and genuine when it's spontaneous and from the heart, but what we learn from Scripture is that the deep people of faith in the Bible have always relied on the written prayers of others to guide them in learning how to pray. That's why we pray the Lord's Prayer so often here at First Pres. The words of faithful people who have gone before us can serve as a guide in teaching us how to pray.

The truth is Jonah turned to God because he had nowhere else to go. That's why he prayed. In the first chapter Jonah makes plans, he has resources, and he's going places. But all that proves to be a disaster. The storm hits, and Jonah's life

grinds to a halt. Then in the second chapter of the story, there is no action, just prayer. Jonah has nowhere to go and no one to turn to other than God. And that's when the good stuff starts to happen in his life. If you feel like you're coming the end of your rope, take courage, because that's when God shows up and good things begin to happen a life of faith.

Jonah prayed, and the climax of the prayer comes when he talks about God's *chesdh* (2:9). It is an important biblical word which is often translated as "steadfast love" or "grace," and it refers to the covenant love of God. It takes the whole prayer for Jonah to get there, but when he does he is finally released back into the land of the living.

In his book *Knowing God* British theologian J.I. Packer observed that many people talk *about* God's grace, but they usually do so in an abstract way without any personal experience of its life-changing power. He says that there are several critical truths in the doctrine of God's grace which if they are not acknowledged and experienced in one's heart, genuine faith becomes impossible.² Jonah's prayer shows him coming to grips with all three of these.

First, he begins to grasp the "moral desert," as Packer calls it, of his life. That's sometimes hard for people to come to terms with nowadays because we're often taught that our problem is a lack of self-esteem, or that we live with too much guilt and shame. But Jonah's prayer recognized that God was just in dealing with the prophet as He did, and Jonah got what he deserved. As long as we try to excuse our bad behavior or blame it on someone else, we'll never get to the place of healing that is needed to repair the fracture in our souls.

Second, Packer says we need to come to a place where we realize our "spiritual impotence." Alcoholics Anonymous puts it this way in Step One of the 12 Steps of recovery: "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable." As long as you think you don't really have much of a problem, and as long as you think you can fix the brokenness in your life yourself, you'll never find the healing your soul really needs. You've got to come to the place where you acknowledge you've made a mess of things, that you're spiritually bankrupt, and that you are powerless to solve the problem yourself. That's what Jonah did.

And finally, Packer says the last step we need to take in order to fully grasp God's grace is to realize just how costly the salvation God provided really is. Not once but twice in his prayer, Jonah looked toward the Temple in Jerusalem, and he thought about the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. That's the place where the atoning sacrifice for sins was made for the people of God on a regular basis. Those of us who live on this side of the cross and know about the sacrifice Jesus made for us realize all the more just how costly God's salvation really is. And it's when you begin to understand how much Jesus sacrificed for you that your heart

can be broken, and you begin to be overwhelmed by the love and grace of God.

Jonah was lost and unable to unlock the doors of his prison, and yet God rescued him. Jonah began to praise God, and he rededicated himself to the Lord's service before he had any assurance that he was going to escape by a supernatural deliverance. In other words, Jonah experienced a spiritual breakthrough. His reflection led to repentance, and his repentance changed his life.

Have you experienced that kind of spiritual transformation? Do you know what it's like to be apprehended by the grace and love of God? Has Jesus touched your heart in such a way that you want to walk in a different direction and follow where He leads? The word "repentance" means a change of mind that leads to a change of heart which results in a change of direction. That's happened in Jonah's life, and it can happen for you, too.

III. A Miraculous Deliverance.

Many people read the book of Jonah and think it's just a fairy tale. They read about a man who gets swallowed by a great fish and lives to tell about it. "That sounds like a whale of a tale," they think (even though you'll note a whale is never mentioned in the Bible). People ask, "How can a person live inside the belly of a fish for three days and come out alive? The Bible is too hard for me to believe when I read things like this," they say. "It doesn't match with what I know about life, or science for that matter."

However, I would suggest that the presupposition behind statements and questions like these presents a faulty logic. Sure, in the natural order of things, it's impossible for a person to be swallowed by a fish, live in its belly for three days, and survive. However, when it comes to God we aren't confined to the natural order of things. That's when the supernatural comes into play, and God has the ability to rule and overrule the laws of nature. How else could Jesus walk on the water? Or change water into wine? Or heal a blind person?

The God who created the universe out of nothing is able to do the impossible. The One who formed the planets and set them spinning in space isn't bound by the laws of nature. He created the laws of nature! And if you believe that the resurrection of Jesus really happened, then Jonah surviving three days and nights in the belly of a great fish is rather easy to accept. It comes down to whether or not you believe in a God of miracles. And I guarantee you, when you've got a loved one battling a terminal illness, or a wayward child who has run away from home, or a problem in business that is as big as a mountain, you want to believe in a God who can do the impossible. You want a God of miracles. And our God can do big ones.

Jonah prayed, and on the third day he was delivered from the fish. The passage says, "*The Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land*" (2:10).

John Ortberg says that at this point it feels like the sixth-grade version of the story when all the middle school kids read it and say, “Euuwwwww!” Jonah was spit out onto the beach with shrimp cocktail all over him. If you wonder why the translators of the Bible didn’t choose a more dignified word to use than “vomit,” it’s because the Hebrew word is even more graphic. But it worked, and Jonah had a new beginning. He was able to start over again and fulfill the call God laid on his life.

Conclusion.

I want to go back to the little detail in this chapter which says that on the third day Jonah was delivered. The third day is a common framework of time in the Bible, and you see it over and over again in Scripture. Toward the end of His life Jesus said He had one sign to give the world to prove His claim to be the Son of God, and it was the sign of Jonah. *“As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt. 12:40).*

The resurrection of Jesus Christ had been foreshadowed in the miracle of Jonah’s “resurrection.” And just as Jonah’s deliverance from the belly of the fish led to the salvation of many people in Nineveh, so the resurrection of Jesus led to the salvation of the whole world. The resurrection of the crucified Son of God was Jesus’ one great sign, and it all reflected back to the story of Jonah.

Scripture tells us that Jonah was from a town called Gath-hepher, which is just a few miles away from Nazareth. There is another prophet who came from Nazareth. It was Jesus. And He, too, would fall asleep in a boat one day while everyone else panicked, and He also would calm a storm just by His response. The name Jonah means “dove,” and it’s is a name that can also mean “given to a beloved one.” Jesus was another prophet who would go down into the water, and when Christ came up out of it a dove descended on Him, and voice from heaven said, “This is my Son whom I love. With Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him.”³

The early church used to meet in a place call the catacombs in Rome. They were tombs, underground burial places. They met there in secret for fear of discovery and arrest, because the Roman Empire at the time outlawed Christianity. The first art that was inspired by Jesus didn’t appeared in great cathedrals or on large frescoes. It was art that was drawn and etched in the tombs, in the hidden catacombs. And the Old Testament figure that was most frequently depicted in early Christian art wasn’t Abraham or Moses. It was Jonah.⁴

Why was that? It’s because the early church understood the story of Jonah and how it served as a pattern for the resurrection of Jesus. Our Lord spent three days and three nights in the belly of a tomb of death, and just as God delivered Jonah by a miracle, so God the Father rescued His Son through the miracle of the

resurrection. Because of Jesus, death was conquered once and for all, and the grave was rendered powerless.

I love how the Bible fits together in such a remarkable way. It all ties together, doesn't it? It sort of makes you think that maybe God wrote the whole thing. And He did! Thanks be to God for the hope of the resurrection and the promise of salvation for all who repent and call on His name. If you find yourself in some type of tomb today and feel like you're trapped and need a Savior, turn to Jesus and ask Him to deliver you. He's only a prayer away. Just ask Jonah. Amen.

¹ Also written in John Ortberg's book *All the Places You'll Go*, p. 184.

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 117. Cited by Tim Keller in *Prodigal Prophet* (New York: Viking Press, 2018), p. 74. I got several of the thoughts for this point in my sermon from Tim's excellent book.

³ Ortberg, p. 202.

⁴ Ortberg, p. 200.