

In the Belly of a Whale

Jonah 2: 1-10

Rev. Philip Parker

June 30, 2024

A teacher asked her class if they knew anything about whales. One little girl spoke up and said that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. The teacher smiled and then said that she didn't think that was very likely because, even though whales can be really big, their throats are not big enough to swallow a man. But the little girl was adamant. She said that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Growing impatient, the teacher repeated that whales can't swallow human beings. It was physically impossible. In response, the little girl said, "When I get to heaven, I'll ask Jonah." Now clearly perturbed the teacher remarked, "What if Jonah went to hell?" The little girl replied, "Then you can ask him!"

The account of Jonah being swallowed by a whale has been debated for a long time. In fact, at times it has become so contentious that the whale not only swallows Jonah, but the entire message of this Old Testament book. Nevertheless, it is still a topic of continued fascination. Some of a more liberal mind set say that the book of Jonah is not historical. It's a parable, a story that should not be taken literally. Others respond that there are, indeed, sea creatures that can swallow a human being and share reports of events where people were actually found alive after being swallowed by a denizen of the deep. Finally, there are some who declare, "Why all the discussion? Isn't God capable of creating just the right creature to do His bidding? After all, the Bible doesn't say he was swallowed by a whale, but instead by a great big fish." Regardless of where you stand in this continuing debate, I agree with the little girl. When we get to heaven we can ask Jonah and get everything straightened out. In the meantime, let's see what this second chapter in the book of Jonah has to say to us this morning.

For starters, let's imagine what it was like for Jonah to be incarcerated in the belly of that great big fish for three days. I don't know about you, but I would be scared out of my mind. It would be a terrifying experience. However, even without being swallowed by a whale or a great big fish, there are some experiences in life that can be almost as frightening. Sometimes we face emotional traumas that are just as scary as anything we might encounter physically. Take, for example, the woman who arrived at the counselor's office years ago. She was the mother of three children, one of whom was mentally challenged. She had just received a pink slip from her employer. Not only that, several months earlier her husband had left her,

but not before emptying out the family's bank account. To put it mildly, she was devastated. She was beside herself with anxiety and worry. She had been swallowed by a terrifying set of circumstances.

Like her, I suspect there have been times in all of our lives when we can identify with this lady. Perhaps the situation we found ourselves in was not as horrendous. Nevertheless, we felt like we had been consumed by a monster from the deep. Perhaps it was the loss of employment, a health crisis, a family dispute, or the prospect of facing financial ruin. In any case, whether we are an innocent victim of circumstances beyond our control or have brought one or all of these problems upon ourselves, we can certainly understand and sympathize with Jonah as he cried out to the Lord, "The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever" (Jonah 2:5-6). Throughout the Scriptures, this is a familiar cry uttered by those who are facing difficult, sometimes impossibly difficult situations. The writer of Psalm 69 cries out, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me" (Psalm 69:1-2). So let's be honest, all of us face trials and tribulations in life. It's a part of the human experience and sometimes those trials and tribulations are like being cast into the belly of a great big whale.

However, those trials and tribulations can become the impetus for us to look beyond ourselves and cry out to God and that's precisely what Jonah did. Chapter two, verse one says, "From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD His God." In fact, almost all of chapter two is a prayer. What kind of prayer did he pray? First of all it was a prayer of deep distress. Jonah thought he was going to die, banished from God's presence in a watery grave. But it was more than just a prayer of distress. It was a prayer of spiritual discernment. Jonah came to the realization that he was not alone. God was right there with him in the belly of that whale. He said, "When I felt my life slipping away, then, O LORD, I prayed to You, and in Your holy Temple You heard me" (Jonah 2:7). In the moment of his greatest need, Jonah reached out to God and he was not disappointed.

Years ago I read this account of a businessman who had been kidnapped by Venezuelan terrorists. For three and a half years he was held as a prisoner in the Amazon jungle. Often masked and sometimes shackled, he was moved from camp to camp while his captors demanded a huge ransom. With hair down to his shoulders and a beard longer than Rip Van Winkle's, he was often at the point of absolute despair. He told his captors to kill him. Then one day he saw an ant carrying a huge crumb of food and that

reminded him of the tremendous strength that God has built into all of His creatures. It also reminded him of the strength that God had given him to endure those years of desperation and loneliness in the jungle. He felt closer to God than he had ever felt before. In the article he wrote about his captivity, he said, "A kind of serenity had come to me, a kind of acceptance. I felt closer to God in my solitude than I had ever felt in my life."* Like Jonah and perhaps like you in the midst of despair and loneliness at some point in your life, instead of feeling all alone, you discerned, you realized, that God was with you and His peace and His presence sustained you and strengthened you. Paul echoes this truth in his letter to the Philippians. He says, "Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer with supplication, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and their minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

Fortunately for Jonah and hopefully for all of us when we find ourselves in similar situations, knowing that God is near can replace our doom and despair with a sense of inner joy. Jonah cried out, "I will sing praises to you; I will offer you a sacrifice, and do what have I promised. Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). He wasn't sure what would happen, but he now knew that God was not only with him, but in charge of what would happen to him. If God still wanted to use him, he would offer a sacrifice, his own life and he would go to that dreaded place, the city of Nineveh. And guess what? That was exactly what God wanted to hear. The last verse in this chapter declares, "Then the LORD ordered the fish to spit Jonah up on the beach and it did" (Jonah 2:10). Jonah was delivered from his watery grave.

In the account of the man who was kidnapped by the terrorists, the very same thing happened. Watching that ant convinced him that God still had a plan for his life. He prayed, "I trust You Lord. I place my life in your hands." Still watching that ant carrying the huge piece of bread, he heard a rustle at the hut's door. A man was standing there without the mask that his captors always wore. It was a policeman in a uniform. He had been delivered from his captivity and was soon returned to a joyous reunion with his family. He was not, however, the same man that he had been. Like Paul he had learned to be content in whatever situation he found himself, because he had discovered we can do "all things through Christ who strengthens us" (Philippians 4:11-13).

The same is true for you and me. Like Jonah and like the prisoner in the jungle, we too can rise above even the most desperate of situations through the strength that God gives us in Christ Jesus. In fact, it was this very same strength from God that Christ alluded to when he compared Himself to this

prophet of old. He said, "For as Jonah was three nights and three days in the belly of a whale, a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). Jesus was, of course, referring to His death and resurrection. It was a promise that would be fulfilled when Christ was raised from the dead. It's also a promise that God has made to each and every one of us. Even when we find ourselves in the belly of a huge, monstrous whale, we too entrust our lives into God's care. We too can be raised to a newness of life, both for the here and now as well as for the forever after.