

July 16th: In the Belly

Today we continue our journey together into the story of Jonah. I've mentioned the past two weeks that as we navigate this ancient text, we'll be looking for insight about how to understand Jonah's choices and how to apply this wisdom to our own lives. Jonah's story may be thousands of years old, but I think it will be surprisingly relevant to us—both because of its human-ness, and because of God's consistent grace for and presence with his beloved creation.

This series will be slightly different than ones we've done in the past, and that is for a couple reasons. Jonah is not a terribly long story, and it might be easy to cover quickly. But rather than rushing through it, I think the right thing for us to do in this season of our congregational life is to slow down and not only learn more about this text, but also practice what we are learning together. So I've split this short story into five sections, and we'll be spending two weeks on each section. For each passage, we'll first dig into the historical and theological background of the narrative, focusing on some bigger questions and making connections to other pieces of scripture. And then on the second Sunday, we'll recap some of those thoughts and reflect on the more personal and application based side of the story, using a different spiritual practice each week to place ourselves in Jonah's shoes and bring his experiences into our modern life.

This morning we turn to Jonah chapter 2, one of the most famous parts of this story. Before we hear more, let's pray together.

God our Savior,

In the darkest moments of our lives, you are there. In the depths of our sadness, you are there. In our aching brokenness, you are there. In our hardest choices, you are there. Wherever we go, you are there waiting for us. It is you alone that we can count on to rescue us when we find ourselves in the mess of our human lives. Be with us today as you were there with Jonah in the belly of the fish. Draw near to us and keep us safe in whatever trials we might face in the week ahead. Amen.

In the art of storytelling, narratives are often structured like a bell curve: there's the building of drama and conflict, the climax where tension is addressed, and then some kind of resolution for the characters involved. Maybe you've noticed this pattern, as you watched episodes of your favorite TV show or listened to a Prairie Home Companion on public radio or heard a really great stand up comedy special on Netflix. Human beings inherently like stories that fall into this predictable paradigm, because it helps us anticipate what is going to happen, all while being able to enjoy the tension or express our emotions through the happy ending. This is why we enjoy music and movies and great literature and even good sermon illustrations, because we use these narratives to explore our human experiences and relate to others who have gone through different circumstances.

Our biblical story sometimes uses this structure in its ancient storytelling, but sometimes we have stories in scripture that defy our expectations. Jonah is one of those instances—not just because its structure is a little strange, but because almost all of the action and almost all of the intensity happens in these first two chapters. This means that when most people think of Jonah's story, they think of Chapter 2. And to be fair, this is a very memorable and significant part of the story—in some ways it is the theological and spiritual climax of the narrative—but because it is so familiar, some of the details have gotten a little fuzzy. And because of this, I think there are a fair number of misconceptions about these verses, misconceptions that I'd like to clear up this morning. We'll get to those in just a bit.

First, let's recap Chapter 1: in this opening act, Jonah the Hebrew prophet receives a call from God to preach to the city of Nineveh, but he is so afraid that he runs away in the opposite direction. He boards a boat bound for Tarshish, as far from home as he could possibly get, but he doesn't get very far, because his ship ends up in the middle of a massive storm. In order to appease God and calm the seas, Jonah convinces his traveling companions to throw him overboard, which should have resulted in Jonah's certain death.

Key words here: should have. Our text tries to tell us that Jonah should have died. He should not have made it. However, that's not how our story goes.

The last verse of chapter 1 tells us that God had a different idea for Jonah when he was cast into the waters. Verse 17 says, "Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

So, here's misconception number one: there is no whale in this story. Christians love to preach about Jonah and the Whale, probably because that's easier for our minds to understand, but in the original Hebrew, the text is clear, it is not an orca, or dolphin or a shark, Jonah is swallowed by a very big fish. You might be thinking to yourself that this is just a minor detail that has no bearing upon the rest of the story. You're probably right, but I still like to set the record straight.

We begin chapter 2 with this reality: Jonah is now in the belly of the fish, and he will stay there for three days and three nights. Now, in Israelites parlance, the language of three days and three nights is pretty commonplace in scripture. It's often used to describe a long journey or as a reference for a large distance—it's sometimes a metaphor, not a strict or specific unit of measurement. Our biblical author is trying to tell us that Jonah needed some time in the belly of the fish to really contemplate what has happened to him.

So in verse 1 of this new chapter, we learn that while Jonah isn't dead or in a coma while he's in the fish—he's alive and he's praying. As I said, Jonah's prayer is probably the most well known piece of this whole story, and for good reason. But this prayer isn't just a prayer—it's recorded in the book of Jonah as a poem—and there is so much beauty in these words and this form of storytelling if we look closely enough.

The prayer begins with this: "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 basically rewinds the story, and goes back to the moments he remembers of being in the water. In the verses that follow, Jonah begins to describe what happened to him when he was thrown overboard into the sea. He says this about his distress:

“You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’ The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.”

You might notice that Jonah interprets this descent into the waves as a form of punishment for his disobedience. He takes these natural phenomena, like the waves and the currents, and sees them as agents of God’s anger and disappointment with him. As he sinks down, he even believes that God has banished him—he believes that God has abandoned him. Jonah even mentions that seaweed was wrapped around his head, creating an image of him struggling along the seafloor, trapped by these aquatic chains.

The language here is pretty visceral—in the original Hebrew you can hear all sorts of alliterative and dramatic emphasis in these phrases—and even in the English translation there’s a sense of impending doom conveyed by these words: hurled, swirled, banished, engulfing, threatened, surrounded, it almost reads like a thriller movie synopsis more than a biblical poem.

And there’s a reason for that: Jonah is speaking to an ancient belief about the world’s cosmology—a belief that placed the Israelite equivalent of hell at the bottom of the sea. And not only is Sheol, the place of the dead, at the bottom of the sea, but there’s something else beyond that. In ancient Hebrew mythology, the earth was contained by a giant dome, that stretched from one horizon to the other. This dome separated the “waters above” and the “waters below” that were described in the creation story of Genesis, and this dome was held up by the pillars of the earth. But beyond even the pillars of the earth, was a

place that scripture just calls “the Deep,” or “theom” in Hebrew. Theom was a place of total chaos, a place that needed to be separated from creation by the dome that God created. Theom is the place where Jonah feels like he is sinking—he is being drawn down to a such a depth that is no longer just facing death, but also complete and total isolation from God. He is facing eternal estrangement from creation—all the beauty, and order, and peace—and is headed to a place of disorder and turmoil.

But here’s why this chapter is so powerful: even in these darkest circumstances, there is hope in Jonah’s poem. Even at the climax of Jonah’s desolation, a miracle is possible. Jonah tells us that even from the gates of sheol, rescue is coming. Even at the moment of total chaos and isolation, God is there. In verse 6, he says, “But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.”

Help comes in an unexpected form: a giant fish. And so we have misconception number two: God did not send the fish to swallow Jonah as further punishment for Jonah’s sins as so many of us expect—the fish was sent to rescue Jonah from the depths of the sea. In a lot of children’s versions of this story, the fish is seen as a villain, keeping Jonah trapped below the water, but the truth is that God sent the fish as an act of salvation—the fish is the hero of Jonah’s narrative!

From the bottom of the ocean, Jonah recalls how his cries to God were answered and so now he responds by saying, “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”

Our chapter concludes with this good news: “And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” Not necessarily a clean end to this piece of the story, but Jonah is now safe from both the storm and the waters.

As nice as this resolution, I'm still not quite sure that Jonah's story is a simple one. Shakespeare might say that "all's well that ends well," but somehow we're still in the middle of the story. We still have two chapters left to go, and it seems like all the important action has already happened, hasn't it?

But I think there's a lesson that Jonah is supposed to learn in these first two chapters, a lesson that he needs to learn before we begins his prophetic ministry in Nineveh. And I think there's some lessons that we, the audience, might need to learn as well, before we are sent out to the work that God has called us to.

So as I replayed these words in my mind this week, I had some questions that would just not leave me alone. **As I searched for the right way to share this message to share with you all, I thought to myself:**

Why is Jonah so intent on believing that he needed to be punished, even after he had already been sacrificed by his fellow sailors? Why are we so intent of seeing Jonah punished, or interpreting his time in the belly of the fish as further discipline for his disobedience?

How do we reconcile this desire to see others punished for their mistakes with our belief in a merciful God who freely forgives our own errors in judgment?

How can we believe in and experience divine rescue for ourselves, but desire that others be faced with chaos and separation from God?

We'll see in the next act of this story that Jonah doesn't quite learn his lesson—the grace and protection that was shown to him in this section of our biblical narrative doesn't necessarily translate into chapters 3 and 4, when he travels to the city of his enemies and begins to preach to the Ninevites. We'll talk more about that in a couple of weeks.

Next Sunday, we'll examine this passage again from a more personal and application based angle—but if you are in the belly of something right now, I

don't want you to walk away from this text and time together without these words:

No matter what comes next in this biblical story and in our own lives, I don't want us to forget that there is something beautiful about this poem and the promises that are woven into it. There is something redemptive about the way that God enters into these stories and takes action to save all of us from our distress. There is something healing about our God hearing all of our cries and sending aid in these moments of fear, both ancient and modern. There is something sacred in God's ongoing desire to bring us back from the brink of chaos so that we can find peace and wholeness on dry land.

And so my friends, no matter what depths you find yourselves in this morning, no matter how far removed you feel from the divine, I want you to know that your story isn't over yet.

Amen.