

July 23rd: In the Belly, part two

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 return to Jonah chapter 2, and take another look at Jonah's time inside the fish. We have our spiritual practice too, but first, let's ask for God's presence and wisdom to be with us.

Ever Present God,

Sometimes when we are at our lowest, we don't even have the words for our desperation and sorrow. Sometimes we can pray, but sometimes we simply cry out—all we can do is groan. Sometimes we lack the right language to describe our circumstances, or we only have the words that we think we are supposed to say, we are not able to express ourselves the way that we would like. Sometimes we can barely explain to ourselves the truth of our situation, so it seems

impossible to share it with others. Despite all of this, we know that you hear us. We know that you listen to us. We know that you understand us. And most of all, we know that you love us. Against all odds, you love us just as we are. So hear us, listen to us, understand us, love us now, we pray. Amen.

Last week we introduced the major action that happens in this section of Jonah's story—the seeming climax of our story. After Jonah is tossed into waves, we read that he sinks down into the sea, until he reaches the very bottom and his head is wrapped in seaweed, like slimy, aquatic chains. Jonah is sure that his life is about to end, and he believes that he has been abandoned by God in the depths of the earth, left to spend eternity outside of God's reach. You might remember that he uses dramatic language to talk about this moment of despair, language that I'm sure resonates with many of us who have had endured similar situations of fear and desolation.

However, this isn't how our story ends, or even our chapter. As I said last week, 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. God is waiting for Jonah, God is with Jonah. God sends the fish to swallow Jonah as an act of salvation.

But this piece of the Jonah narrative isn't as simple as it seems on the surface. This text has often been misinterpreted, misconstrued, misused, or seen as a vehicle for voicing God's so called wrath—human beings over the past many centuries have seen this story as evidence that God is keen to punish anyone who would dare to disobey God's instructions.

And so, I shared that I was still unsettled by certain aspects of this chapter.

Here are the questions that swirled around my head last week as a result of learning more about the theology behind this story:

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?

Now, I don't know about you, but believing in a God of punishment is not very compelling. I'm not all that interested in worshipping and serving a God who would banish one of their beloved children or abandon them in their moment of need. So it's a really good thing then, that I think Jonah's story isn't about punishment at all. We might believe that the Book of Jonah is a story about disobedience, but as we'll continue to see, this isn't the case at all. Jonah might have made one mistake that set him on the wrong path, but that doesn't mean that God is done with him. What I think this chapter is trying to communicate is that there is no place to which God won't go to bring us back into relationship. There isn't anything we could do to permanently remove ourselves from God's family. There isn't anywhere we could try to run where God will not seek us out again.

And thankfully, the same is true for us, even thousands of years later. We might find ourselves in desperate situations, or down the wrong path, or wrapped up in things that are hard to get out of—but God doesn't give up on us that easily.

And so, as we reflect on Jonah's prayer together and think more deeply about our own life experiences—we have an opportunity to practice our own ways of praying. The first spiritual practice that we tried together was called a Self Inventory—and we looked inward while listening for what God might be saying to us. The second spiritual practice in this series was focused on art—specifically graffiti art done by the Afghan artist Shamsia Hassani, and we meditates on her images with the intention of finding empathy for Jonah and

his fellow sailors in the midst of the storm. Today, we're going to try something new—something similar to Jonah's methods used in this chapter.

Before we dive in, let me share a little bit about how this practice came into my life.

A few years ago, while I was experiencing a challenging time in my personal and professional life, I stumbled across a Facebook page called Haiku Prayers—a community created by a pastor named John Stevens, who used his pen each week to write simple but powerful poems that spoke to the doubts and struggles of everyday life. At this point, poetry wasn't really my thing. I liked Mary Oliver, and I had read some Walt Whitman in college, but on the whole, I felt like poetry wasn't something that I gravitated towards. I saw it too complicated, too difficult to understand, too frustrating to create on my own—and so I initially dismissed Haiku Prayers as something forgettable and not all that relevant to me.

But when the usual prayers that I turned to in moments of need fell flat and lifeless, and I ran out the right words to say to God, I remembered the uncomplicated nature of these haikus, and I wondered if it might be easier to pray this way in moments of stress. I don't mean praying in a strict pattern, but the idea of praying with brevity and simplicity. Now, it's true that haikus as a genre are not necessarily found in our scripture texts, as this particular form originates from ancient and medieval Japan, but poetry in general is central to many parts of our Bible—we see it used here in Jonah's story to communicate his emotions, we have a whole book dedicated to the Psalms and the songs that make up a large part of Old Testament worship, and we have prophetic texts that speak in these kinds of metered voice and rhythmic structures. So while we might not find the typical haiku configuration of 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables in our Christian texts, it doesn't mean that it can't be used by modern disciples of Jesus as a tool for communication and expression.

The community of Haiku Prayers has grown over the years—now with thousands of followers and dozens of churches around the globe who regularly share John's work with their friends and family members. Not only to

people come together to read Pastor John's latest writings, they also gather to share their own. It's turned into a collaborative space, where the creativity of individuals comes together into a safe place for spiritual honesty and openness to the divine. And in a world so marked by violence and brutality, I think it's remarkable that this community has been able to spread such hope and hospitality to those who are struggling. In communities often marked by harsh judgments and vitrioli comments on social media—it has been transformative to see a group of people use their words as a gift to others—a gift to lift others up rather than tear them down.

If it's alright with you, I'd like to share a few of these haikus that have resonated with me recently—including some that I think tie into Jonah's story.

cue powerpoint

This first one reads,

“God, please sit with me
Help my breath find its rhythm
Calm my anxious heart”

The second one says this:

“Feeling tired today
Taking a rest is ok
Cup needs refilling.”

Here's the third one:

“Don't feel like talking
My words lack all substance, God
Please just sit with me”

And the fourth one, perhaps we all need to hear this one today,

“Do you love me, God?
Fear tells me that you do not.
Fear is a liar.”

Here’s our fifth haiku, which sounds similar to the lines of Jonah’s poem:

“This anxiety–
Held prisoner by my fear
God, please set me free”

This one is number six,

“My eyes open wide
By the moonlight, worry strikes
Enfold me with Grace”

And number seven:

“Prayers leave an echo
I search for words today, God
I pray you hear me”

Here’s another one, with a little bit of a slang twist,
“New phone; who is this?
You keep calling me, Jesus
Please help me answer.”

And the last one for today, to help us prepare for our own poetic practice:

“Pen hovers over
Like Spirit did the waters.
God, help me create.”

Before we take a few moments to enter into our time of spiritual reflection, I want to ask:

Did any of these haikus catch your attention? Did any of them seem like thoughts that you recognize from inside your own mind? Have you been longing to say something similar? Did this form of poetry strike you as a way to communicate in a way that makes sense for your own spirituality?

We're going to take a few minutes now to reflect on our own stories and our own current challenges—and perhaps write a haiku or poem of our own. If you picked up a worksheet on your way in today, now would be a great time to pull that out—but if you'd prefer to use your phone or just think and compose internally, that's totally fine as well. If you do have a worksheet, you'll notice that there's a few questions to help guide your thoughts—and those are:

What have I been going through lately?
What emotions have risen to the surface?

Poetry is a great medium for expressing our true feelings—there's no need to explain, or justify yourself, or back it all up with facts like you might do in an essay. There's no need to be persuasive or to fit in a larger narrative—it can just be your most honest words right in this moment.

Like with our previous spiritual practices, let's take a few deep breaths together, find a comfortable position in our chairs, and then we will have some background music playing so that you can relax into a more meditative state.

Does that sound good? Wonderful, let's begin.

cue music

Welcome back, friends. How was this time of reflection and writing for you? Thumbs up, thumbs down, somewhere in the middle?

If you didn't succeed in creating the most perfect poem this morning—do not worry. If you're still searching for the right words, or can't yet articulate the fullness of what is going on inside of you—that's okay. But I hope that this time of reflection gave you a chance to connect with God in a new way—perhaps in a way that you have never tried before. And I pray that this might be the start of a growing and strengthening relationship with the divine, no matter where you find yourself on this spiritual journey we call life.

I'll leave you today with this:

My friends, even in the depth of the sea, God still had plans for Jonah. Even at his rock bottom, God was reaching down. So if you can relate to Jonah today, I want you to remember that God isn't done with you yet. God loves you too much to let you go. God's method of rescue might not seem like salvation at this moment of despair, but there is safer, more steady, more solid ground ahead.

Amen.