

September 17, 2017
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Life Beyond Death:

The Belly of the Whale”

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Jonah 1:1–17

*1*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, *2*“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” *3*But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. *4*But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. *5*Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. *6*The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” *7*The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. *8*Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” *9*“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” *10*Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so. *11*Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. *12*He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” *13*Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. *14*Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” *15*So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. *16*Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. *17*But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Matthew 12:38–41

*38*Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” *39*But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. *40*For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. *41*The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

Philippians 3:10–11

*10*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, *11*if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

“Life Beyond Death: The Belly of the Whale”
Jonah 1:1–17, Matthew 12:38–41, Philippians 3:10–11

Last summer on June 25th, a family in England experienced the unimaginable: the sudden death of husband and father Jon at age forty-four. In a letter online sharing the news of his death, his wife Donna wrote, “Comfort is very hard to find right now, but there is some in the fact that...Jon was uniquely and unusually aware that life is short and appreciated his life fully...He pulled off that challenge so many of us can only aspire to, of truly appreciating what we have.”¹

What made Jon Underwood so uniquely and unusually aware of the preciousness of life is that he was the founder of the Death Café movement, which started in his London basement in 2011, and has since expanded throughout the world. A Death Café is a free, open meeting for people to come and talk about death. It is not a grief support group or an end of life planning session, but a philosophical conversation about what death is, why we fear it, and how our views of death affect our lives. The goal of Death Café is to increase awareness of death to help people make the most of their (finite) lives.

I learned about the Death Café movement this week when I attended a conference hosted by Hospice of the Western Reserve. As I listened to the presenters and the conversations happening around me, I kept thinking about how interesting it is that we who are Christian, whose religion exists because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, are just as *uncomfortable* with death as everyone else.

This fall, we will seek to confront this discomfort in our series *Life Beyond*. Over the next six weeks we will be talking about life beyond some of the many things that can lead to death, whether literal or metaphorical. We will hear from folks in our community who have particular expertise – either personally or professionally – in finding life beyond identity, addiction, and despair, as well as those who have much to teach us about the importance of thinking through our wishes for how we will live as we approach death. These conversations will culminate in our Covenant Lecture series, when Ellen Goodman, the founder of the Conversation Project, will join us to share what she has learned from her work helping family members have conversations about their end of life wishes. Our hope is that, with partners such as the Cleveland Clinic, University

¹ <http://deathcafe.com/blog/231/>

Hospitals, and Hospice of the Western Reserve, Ms. Goodman's visit to Cleveland will launch a community-wide, ongoing conversation about these issues – a conversation that can help all of us become like Jon Underwood: *uniquely and unusually aware that life is short so that we can appreciate it fully.*

We begin this conversation with the book of Jonah, *a parable about death*. There are many brushes in the story with literal death: the storm that threatens to break up the boat on which Jonah is trying to escape; Jonah being tossed into the **stormy** sea to appease his God; the “big fish” that supposedly **swallows** Jonah up and houses him for a few days. And God threatening to destroy the Ninevites if the city and its inhabitants do not **repent** of their evil ways. So even though this is one of those Bible stories that often masquerades as a children's story, there are themes here from which *even the most mature among us shy away*. This is not just a story about a stubborn prophet who doesn't want to do as he's told. It is a story, like my story and like your story, **about a human being who must experience a kind of death in order to fully experience the grace of God**. As theologian Richard Rohr puts it, “Jonah was swallowed by a ‘big fish’ and taken where *he would rather not go* – a metaphor for any kind of death. Then and only then will we be spit up on a new shore in spite of ourselves. *Isn't this the story of most of our lives?*”²

In order to understand the degree of Jonah's resistance to going where he would rather not go, that is, to Nineveh, we need to understand something about the relationship between the Judeans, Jonah's people, God's chosen people, and the Assyrians, the country where the city of Nineveh was found. It was a relationship between **terrorist** and **terrorized**. The Assyrians had targeted the Judeans for horrific, cold-blooded, systematic extermination.³ So just imagine hearing the voice of God tell you to go to the white supremacists or the Ku Klux Klan or the closest ISIS cell, or even just to members of the political party different than yours, and tell them that God loves them and forgives them – this is the equivalent of what God asked of Jonah. No wonder he runs away and volunteers to be thrown into the sea! *He would rather die* than face the possibility that *God might just love the Assyrians as much as God's chosen people*.

² Richard Rohr, evotional, August 1, 2017, <https://cac.org/the-belly-of-the-whale-2017-08-01/>

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2988

Of course, we are not surprised by this response, for we seldom go willingly into the belly of the whale. Unless we face a major disaster like the death of a friend or spouse or the loss of a marriage or job, we will rarely go there on our own accord. *We have to be taught the way of descent.* What Richard Rohr calls the way of descent is what Jesus calls “the sign of Jonah.” Jesus knew the story of Jonah, of course. He knew that Jonah’s three days in the belly of the whale were transformational, just as the three days between being crucified and resurrected would be.

For whether we are there for three days or three years, the belly of the whale is where we go to be transformed. The belly of the whale is where we face our fears. The belly of the whale is where we voice our doubts. The belly of the whale is where we confront mystery. The belly of the whale is where we die to self, to all the ways we think and act like we are in control. The belly of the whale is where we learn to lean in to God’s promises, for us, *and for all of God’s children.*

Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Seminary, tells this story, “My father was a preacher who believed it was important to memorize verses of the Bible. On Mondays he’d give my older brother and me a verse...We were expected to recite it from memory by dinner at the end of the week when our father would point to one of us and say something like “Romans 8:28.” If we didn’t start chirping away with “For all things work together for good for those who love God,” we’d have to leave the table.”By the time I was a teenager I had memorized a lot of the Bible, not out of love for the sacred text but because I didn’t want to be dismissed from Saturday evening dinner. I never paid attention to the words. But they were still in me.

“When I was not quite 17, my parents’ marriage broke apart. My mother left our home on Long Island and went to live with her sister in Dallas. My father left the church he had started and just disappeared. My big brother dropped out of college, got a construction job, and helped me finish high school. I got an after-school job at a gas station. Together we got by. Oddly, my brother and I didn’t talk about how our world had crumbled...*We were too worried about the next meal and a place to stay.* “

The following Christmas my brother and I decided we would go to Dallas to visit my mother. We didn’t have the money for a plane or bus ticket, so we did what young people sometimes do when they’re not thinking clearly. We

decided to hitchhike from Long Island to Dallas. “By the end of the first day we were somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It was snowing hard, the sun was long gone, and we stood on the entrance ramp with our thumbs sticking out. After two hours, we finally realized that the highway had been closed. “We stayed put on the side of the dark highway in the blizzard. After months of hustling our way through the immediate issues of making life work, my brother and I were finally forced to talk to each other.

We took a stab at describing our situation, but it didn’t go very well after I mentioned that we were basically disposable to the people who were supposed to love us. We tried to pass the time by quizzing each other on sports statistics. Neither of us had ever been very good at that. “Then my brother pointed to me and said, “Romans 8:28.” We spent much of that night asking each other to recite the verses of the Bible we had memorized but never truly heard. At one point I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” By the time I finished reciting those words, I was crying. Long concludes, “That night, when a passage about the sustaining love of God cast out fear that was too deep for me to even acknowledge, became the turning point in my life.”⁴

Our scriptures and our experience teach us that transformation almost always comes after suffering. This is true for us first as individuals and it is true for us as communities. In her recently published book, *Braving the Wilderness*, Brene Brown writes, “The world feels high lonesome and heartbroken to me right now. We’ve sorted ourselves into factions based on our politics and ideology. We’ve turned away from one another and toward blame and rage. We’re lonely and untethered and scared. So damn scared.” Brown observes that even though we’ve sorted ourselves into factions we are increasingly lonely. You’d think that hunkering down with like-minded people would give us a sense of connection, but when we are only united because we share a common enemy, that doesn’t result in true connection. Connection comes when we are honest and open and vulnerable, first with ourselves and then with one another.⁵ This is not a lesson that Jonah ultimately learns, for even after his time in the belly of the whale, when he goes to Nineveh and fulfills his calling, he

⁴ Craig Barnes, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/night-i-learned-take-chances>

⁵ From Brene Brown’s interview on 1A, <http://the1a.org/shows/2017-09-12/brene-brown-the-quest-for-true-belonging-and-the-courage-to-stand-alone>

resists connecting with the people that he helps to save. And so the book ends with Jonah **angry** and **resentful** and **bitter** that God's grace and compassion extends *even to Jonah's enemies*.

When Jesus tells the Pharisees that the only sign they will be given is the sign of Jonah, he points to Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale as a parallel to the fact that Jesus, the Messiah, must die and be raised. This, he seems to say, is the pattern of human life transformed by God. But Jesus is also pointing to something else, for the story of Jonah is not just a story of Jonah's transformation, but of God's. In Jonah's story we discover that God cares, not just for God's chosen people, **but for all of humanity**, even for those who hate God's people. This is the message that Jesus also came to deliver: that God's love, God's promises, God's transformation is for us *all*. Which means that, no matter our disagreements or divisions, we **all** belong to *each other*.⁶ What better way to discover this belonging than to find connection around the one thing that we know for sure we all share: we are all going to die. Our lives on this earth are finite. One way or another, they will end.

So maybe, as Jon Underwood did, we should begin with the end, and talk about death. Maybe we should muster the courage to be open and honest and vulnerable about our experiences of transformation and of finding new life after life as we knew it ended, those times when new life came out of the shadows of death and failure and loss and letting go. Honesty, openness, vulnerability – this is our best chance to discover genuine connection, even with those we label enemies.

If we can learn to embrace death – in all its forms, then the next time we find ourselves facing it, whether at the actual end of our lives or at the end of the lives we thought we would have, maybe then we will not be afraid to be tossed into that stormy sea and swallowed into the belly of the whale where – with patience, compassion, and infinite love – God awaits.

Amen.

⁶http://day1.org/7065on_scripture_special_the_challenge_of_jonah_countering_radicalization_through_radical_inclusion_by_frances_flannery