

"Adversity is Opportunity"

Jonah 2:1-9

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Pastor Larry Lineberger

As most of you are aware, we are in midst of a little sermon series reflecting upon the challenging little book of Jonah. Jonah, like many of the prophets, was not eager to take on the challenges of speaking the Word of the Lord. To call him reluctant is a gross understatement. While many of the prophets expressed misgivings, hesitance about their God-given task, Jonah is the only one who simply turned tail and ran away. You know the story. Nineveh, the place where he was called to serve, was geographically, culturally, especially spiritually, the other side of the world. He wanted no part of it. He bought a one way ticket to Tarshish, the opposite direction.

But God wasn't done with Jonah. It wouldn't be that easy. A huge storm threatened the boat and the sailors quickly figured out that their passenger, the one whose guilt had already prodded him to talk about his past, the one had the guilty look on his face, was responsible. He doesn't even protest when they toss him in the sea, a kind of human sacrifice to appease God's wrath. And sure enough, the storm is quieted.

And so we come to today's text, the part everyone knows about, and talks about.

"The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and he was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights." This is where speculation and imagination go into overdrive. Commentators, preachers, theologians and skeptics all seem determined to either prove or disprove the idea that a man can be swallowed by a fish, or sea-going mammal, and somehow live for three days and three nights. One can read paragraph after paragraph talking about the width and breadth of whale mouths, the size and contents of fish stomachs, the quality of the air that might exist in the belly of a huge fish, and on and on. Some writers, of course, use all this data to prove thereby the credibility of the story. Yes, they insist, it is physiologically possible. Yes, there are accounts of similar happenings. (Whalers in Falkland Is.) Others, of course, take the same information and are convinced that it is incredible, not believable, and nothing more than a myth. What do we say to all this? I know what I say...

O good Lord, from all such speculation, from all such longing to rest our faith on sight, to somehow by the laws physics and biology prove that God's word is true, from all this, good Lord, deliver us!

Do we believe that the account is true? Indeed, we do! **Do we believe that is was a miracle? Indeed, we do!** This is not any old fish, but one sent by God! By definition, we

Christians believe many things that cannot be physiologically proven. Can water change to wine? Can 5,000 be fed with a few fish and loaves? Can the blood of one man be sufficient payment for the sins of the world? **Can a man be in the belly of a tomb,** verifiably dead, and rise up in three days? Our creed says that this is "*most certainly true*"! Why should we stumble at the idea of Jonah surviving in the belly of a fish? And besides, this is hardly the theological core of this prophetic writing. This is not a book about a man who got swallowed by a fish and lived to tell about it. **This book is about a man trying to avoid the reality that God's mercy is for the whole world...**that these Ninivites, these foreigners, these heathen, were in fact the target of God's mercy. ...but that's another sermon.

Today we focus on what to do when you find yourself in the belly of a fish. We think about the fact that adversity can be opportunity.

I'm reminded of the story of the three clergymen who were in a restaurant talking about prayer. They were discussing the optimum posture for praying. What is the best way to pray? One insisted that the secret was in the hands... your hands must be folded, or even better, outstretched toward the mercies of God. Another said, "No, the appropriate way to pray was on your knees." The third insisted that to put yourself in the proper frame of mind you had to prostrate yourself, put your face on the floor, preferably facing east toward Mount Calvary. A man sitting at the next table couldn't help but overhear. "*Excuse me*, he said, "*I'm just a layman...but I used to work for the phone company, and I have found that nothing ever put me in a better frame of mind to pray than hanging from my heels, from a telephone pole, 30 feet in the air.*"

I think Jonah would agree. **What do you do when you find yourself in the belly of a whale? You pray!** This is where we have no problem identifying with Jonah. We all know that our prayer life can become rather haphazard and occasional. We may go days and weeks without any substantive prayers other than a perfunctory table prayer, if that, **until, until we find ourselves in crisis.** Until we are in some grave predicament. Then we pray! As the old phrase says it, "*there are no atheists in foxholes.*"

So what can we learn from Jonah's prayer from the belly of the great fish? Indeed, the belly of a fish may not be a great place to live, but it is a great place to learn! So it is with all our times of adversity, when we metaphorically speaking, find ourselves in the belly of a fish.

There is a wonderful passage in Job 36:15 which underscores this lesson. "*God delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity.*" In other words, there is always the strong possibility that what you think is the worst possible thing in your life,

the most undesirable of circumstances, is also the time for you to gain and grow, to learn and be uplifted. Troubles and problems are fertilizer for spiritual growth.

Now that is something to remember the next time you feel the flood waters of adversity rising in your life...when you have more problems than solutions... when hear yourself mumbling, "*Why, Lord? Why me?*"

I often think about how Jonah must have looked back upon this experience in his life. His prayer makes it very clear that this was a **turning point for him, and a source of gratitude**. It was in the belly of the whale that Jonah got his act together, got himself focused, and you must remember that was BEFORE he got himself belched up on dry land. He is still in the belly of the fish. And he had the presence of mind to think **about what had happened, rather than worry about what was going to happen**. Are we learning anything?

What had happened? He had been rescued! He prayed: "*in my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered! From the depths of the grave I called for help, and God listened. I was hurled into the deep and the breakers swept over me the sea weed was around my neck. I was banished from God's sight. And look, it's amazing; I look toward the holy temple. I'm alive! You brought my life up from the pit! I remembered, I know from when cometh my help.*"

And pity the poor people, he says, who cling to worthless idols, or simply curse the darkness, and forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

As for me, he prays, all I have is a song of thanksgiving and commitment to make good on my vows!

Oh, there is no doubt about it. **The belly of the whale was the best thing that ever happened in the life of Jonah**. Imagine that! The worst possible predicament and it becomes a source of thanksgiving and praise. Are we learning anything?

The belly of the fish was a kind of "time out" for Jonah. Three days and nights... that's a long time with nothing to do but reflect on your life, and what has happened. I daresay that's what we all need in the depths of our adversities...to take a "time out" and just think hard about where we have been, about what gracious, even miraculous things have happened to us... WE have been rescued from sin, death and devil.

You remember **that Jesus used the experience of Jonah** to point the minds of his hearers to his own impending crisis...and rescue! In Matt. 12 he says that *just as Jonah*

was in the fish for 3 days and night, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth!
We know how that comes out.

We take a "time out" to remind ourselves that this cross and empty tomb of Jesus is what rescued us from the deep... that it HAS HAPPENED... that no one and no adversity can ever separate us from the love and mercy of God.

Some people say that **Jonah is "type" of Jesus...**an Old Testament Jesus. **No.** We remember that Jonah was in trouble because of his rebellion. Jesus found himself buried in a tomb because of his obedience. Jonah never saved anyone, he got saved! But still the connection is unmistakable. And it reminds us that even in our adversities, there is a good reason for offer our prayer of thanksgiving. Thanks be to God who gives the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I would never pray for you to ever be thrown in the sea of adversity. But I do pray that when adversity does come that we might have the wisdom and insight to take a "time out" and remember the words of Job, *"God delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity."*

The belly of the fish is a tough place to be, but it is a great place to learn and remember all that the Lord had done for us...and to pause and give thanks. God grant it. Amen.