

“All your waves and your billows...”

Jonah 1:17-2:10/2:1-11

Hope Presbyterian Church

Tom Powell

Ministerial Candidate

A Great Fish Swallows Jonah

¹⁷ And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah's Prayer

^{2:1} Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,

“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

³ For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.’

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶ at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O Lord my God.

⁷ When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

¹⁰ And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited
Jonah out upon the dry land.
[ESV]

Introduction

Some folks grew up in households with lots of rules. I didn't. There was one rule, it was the golden rule of my childhood, and it was simple and concise: "Do what you are told when you are told to do it." This rule solved all kinds of problems for my parents. Their authority was absolute. If my brother or I muttered a, "but..." my father was always quick to remind us that we were not following the rule. The sign of a prophet is that he does what he is told to do by God when he is told to do it. Not so with Jonah. Jonah was a prophet in a rough time in the history of the Northern Kingdom. He was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom under the rule of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14). Jeroboam II was not a good king, we are told he did what was evil in the Lord's sight. Things were not going well for the northern Kingdom, the prophet Amos lets us know that it was spiritually compromised and God was readying the nation of Assyria to wipe them out. The only other fact that we have about Jonah occurs in discussing the rule of Jeroboam II, we learn that Jonah is a prophet during his rule.

Here we are presented with a prophet who likely knows that God is readying the Assyrians to inflict God's terrible judgment on the Northern Kingdom and here he gets the message that causes him to flee. He is told to go to the Assyrians (of all people!?) and tell them to turn from their evil ways! The Assyrians? If you think relations between Israel and Iran are rough now, they were worse then. This had to have been abhorrent to an eighth-century Hebrew, especially one who might have had a smaller view of God than he should have.

Jonah took off in a flight of foolishness. When all other prophets, upon hearing from God, got up and went to where they were called or did what they were told to do, Jonah got up and fled as far away as he could get. We're not sure where Tarshish is or was, except that it was as far away as an Israelite could get from Israel. It was literally the other end of the known world.

The Snag of Self-Assurance

However, it is clear that Jonah is in denial. Perhaps even in a great moment of doubt. This doubt is removed when the sea breaks out in storm on his way from Joppa. Although Jonah professes with his mouth to the sailors that his LORD is the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land (1:9) it is clear from his flight that he apparently didn't think that meant much – is Spain or some other far-off place somehow less affected by the LORD? Jonah's view of God was small. His small view of God let him foolishly think he could evade him, and it also caused him to flee in the first place. Who is God to care to send a prophet to the heathen Assyrians?! Jonah professes that he is a Hebrew and fears the Lord. I'm sure when the sea is tossing and turning he feared the Lord, but his actions let us know that he did not take the Lord's command seriously before this judgment came upon him. The tremendous tempest increases and eventually the sailors fear they have no choice; they toss Jonah into the drink. Down he goes. The sailors find the storm calms, these heathen sailors receive a gracious respite and for this mercy they pledge themselves to the LORD. Although Jonah initially claimed that he was a Hebrew and feared the LORD we find that it is the sailors who "feared the Lord exceedingly." The prophet who sought to flee having to deal with bringing the word of the LORD to foreigners has already done so.

Down Jonah goes, he sinks below the waves.

The Sight of Sovereignty

God's supernatural supervision provides Jonah's deliverance. Though deserving nothing God appoints a fish to swallow up Jonah. For three days and three nights – a period of time closely intimating death, for in the ancient near east it was the equivalent of saying, "six feet under" or "dead and gone" – we find Jonah resides in the belly of the fish. It is from within the belly of the fish that we find Jonah offering up a prayer. The type of prayer is very specific though. He is praying a prayer of thanksgiving. You might say to yourself, "thanksgiving?" he's stuck in the belly of a whale! How can that be worth giving thanks over?

We often get distracted by the whale. Most people can tell you that Jonah is swallowed by the whale. The fact of the matter is though, the whale is not Jonah's judgment it is his deliverance! He's grateful for the whale – the whale was the means of his rescue! God provided the whale to rescue Jonah. Without the whale Jonah would have been a whole other kind of fish food!

Jonah can pray with confidence from within the belly of the whale because he has learned a lesson. He has grown in true fear of the LORD. He has seen the acts of the LORD firsthand.

The Source of Sufficiency

The prayer emphasizes just how bad it was going down into the sea. The ancient Jews believed that one of the ways to descend into Sheol was through the bottom of the ocean. Jonah emphasizes that he was pretty sure this is where he was headed on his way below the waves. Though he is then in the belly of the whale, Jonah speaks that he cried out from the belly of Sheol, of the grave. God's righteous judgment of an unfaithful prophet justly caused the waves and currents to pull him down. BUT the same righteous God is full of lovingkindness, his steadfast love endures forever (Ps 136:1). It is the realization of this lovingkindness as it applies to him that allows him to declare (v4) "yet I shall again look upon your holy temple." Though just punishment came upon Jonah, his sinking complete, up to the very end of his life. Have you ever been near drowning, tangled in seaweed, pulled by the riptide so you lost control. Feared death? The emphasis on the direness of the situation, the language of being at the roots of the mountains (which the ancient near eastern people believed needed to have massive supports which went deep below ground) and the imagery of being bound by the bars of the earth are emphatic. Jonah knew his situation was a dire as it could get.

The Song of Salvation

When things were as bad as they could get, Jonah remembered that his Lord was loving. He cried out. He contrasts himself with those who honor idols of vanity (v8-9) and it is in this light we can see he celebrates his rescue. The Lord whose waves and billows washed over him, the same Lord who drove Jonah from his sights, is also the one who heard the prayer, the one who brought him up out of the grave. Just as Jonah can sing for joy, as with all things, Salvation belongs to the Lord. We find the prophet who thought he could flee God in a boat has found that all the world is the Lord's, his words seem to echo back from the first chapter, his LORD is the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and

the dry land! What once might have been an impersonal a matter-of-fact statement becomes the grounds for his confident joy in his God.

Sweetness for the Saints

Knowing that God rescued Jonah might give you some hope, but our real hope lies deeper. Our hope is what Jonah discovered about God's character in his sovereign rule over all the earth. We find four things out about God's character in this passage, particularly as he relates to the saint in great distress.

A saint is never far from God. Our perception might be warped, but God's presence never is. He hears the cries of the faithful; they will ascend to his throne. We place a box on God, as though He'll only hear your call if you're in a church, or your eyes are closed, or if you are feeling suitably pious enough. However this passage shows us that God is there when we turn from him and he is there when we turn to him, no gaps separate he who is infinite and uncontainable from us.

A saint's sins never blind God. You can never sin so much that God will not hear you when you call out to him. Do you think your disobedience could ever keep God from hearing your voice when you cry out to him in your distress? Can you be any more rebellious than Jonah? Who, upon hearing he was to be a special envoy of repentance to the Ninevites chose to directly disobey a command of God. Who, knew and walked with God. Who received direct and clear information from God, and who was willing to tell the sailors with whom he was with that he was fleeing the command of God. Jonah was in direct, overt, rebellion against God. However, when he turned and cried out God heard him. God is like that. If you ever feel he is not, test him. Turn away from your sins of self-reliance, of self-centeredness, the distress of a life focused around self-pleasure and turn to Him. Oh Christian that we would all know this. That no moment would pass wherein we feel we have nothing but a comforter and hearer in God. He is both righteous judge, but ALSO full of lovingkindness. What we see here is that we can never assume that we are ever in a position wherein we are so distant from God as to overrule the guarantee of his steadfast love! No matter how bad one's sins are, they may be blind to God, but God always sees them, always is ready to hear a faithful crying out in distress, always ready to comfort, always ready to console, always ready to be God to a wayward soul who has struck upon a rock in their life, who is thrashing in the sea, who is encompassed by the waves of their own punishment. God is there. God is gracious. Oh that I would know that, so when the sticky false-sweetness of sin is killing me, I would recognize my peril and cry out in my peril to God – who hears the call of distress.

There's a device used in maritime commercial and civilian boating called an *EPIRB* (emergency position-indicating radio beacon). It generates a radio locator call that broadcasts the GPS position when the ship is in distress so that rescuers can find it – as a matter of fact the newest models are actually more than radio beacons, but also satellite beacons traceable anywhere in the world.

We need to be like this beacon in three ways. One, the beacon can be triggered manually even if a ship is not sinking. If we're in trouble we should call out. We should trust God's word that he hears and cry. If our hearts are too stubborn, I urge you to know what distress is like and to be like it in a second way. You see an EPIRB also triggers when it gets wet. Let your response in the distress of sin and a multitude of other distresses be triggers for you to call out. If your sinking, don't go down with the ship and resign

yourself to a fate saying, God must have willed it. To do so is to presume that God doesn't want us to cry out to him. Cry out! Cling to his steadfast love. His Love is true! We must train ourselves to react to distress as the beacon reacts to water, we must immediately signal our need for a rescuer! Lastly, we need to know that there is nowhere that our call cannot be heard – God's more accurate than a satellite, quicker than the coast guard – no storm is too rough, no cloud-cover too pervasive to keep God from responding to our call of distress.

A Saint's Storm of Sins Reveals God's Faithfulness– I wonder if anyone got a chance to walk the beach at low tide after the storms of a couple of weeks ago. If you did you might have been able to notice that often new things are revealed, whole boats have reappeared after a century hidden in the sand. Sometimes, our distresses are like this. What a deceit that we more than willing to sound more like a fatalist than faithful. Our God is sovereign over distress – Romans 8:28 should not be a bible verse known to only give fatalistic comfort – but encourage us to look deeply at the events we find ourselves in: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” We need to walk the shoreline of our distress, and offer up a prayer of thanksgiving for God's faithfulness. He was perpetually sovereign in our distress – We may have been distant from him. If we were far from God before our distress, we ought to examine what led to our distress – looking for God's work. That was Jonah's response in the belly.

Saints at Sea – Compare the storm which we find recorded in Acts 27 – a storm wherein, knowing God's sovereign comfort, Paul speaks in Sovereign security:

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island.”

Not every storm is a storm of Judgment, sometimes it is a storm of deliverance. Sometimes we do not know what kind of storm it is. We ought to spend time at the sea of life so that we might become good navigators, experienced at reading the sea and the clouds of life. Just as sailor in the age of sail aligned their sextant to their stars to be confident of their passage at sea, so too we, at sea in this age of this age of sin must align ourselves to God to properly know the situation where we are in. Job lost sight of God and was nearly wrecked upon the bottom of the sea; Paul, through prayers and confident expectation in God's sovereignty was never to be put in the same place.

Christ, Our Perfect Prophet, The Perfect Aid to Navigation

So then, sailors, I would be misleading you if I didn't give you your greatest comfort. We have a perfect aid to our navigation. All of this talk of Jonah has echoes of something far greater, Jesus Christ. We find recorded in the words of Matthew's Gospel:

³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹ But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks 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 great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Looking at Jonah we have a prophet who flees from God's call.

Looking at Christ we have a prophet who ever faithfully hears God's call.

Looking at Jonah we have a prophet who refuses to bring God's word to those he viewed as unworthy of it.

Looking at Christ we have a prophet who proclaims for the whole world to see, GOD is truly "the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land."

Looking at Jonah we have a prophet who refuses to call out to God until the moment of greatest peril.

Looking at Christ we have a prophet who was ever in accord with God, from the calmest day to the day of his greatest peril.

Looking at Jonah we have a prophet who spent three days in a whale to carry God's word of deliverance to the people of Nineveh.

Looking at Christ we have a prophet who spent three days in death itself so that the word of God's deliverance might be carried to all nations, throughout all time, forever.

Oh saints, we have a better prophet in Christ Jesus - a prophet who declares, "I will never leave you nor forsake you!"

Christ was battered by the hands of men as with if by a storm, swept up in selfish sinful world of men, suffering the death of a sinner, punishment of a sinner, swallowed up into death so that we might never taste it! We can rejoice in our salvation never having to be subject to death! He has swallowed up death in his death!

⁶ On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.

⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

⁹ It will be said on that day,
"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.

This is the Lord; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25)

Oh saints of God, we rejoice in Christ’s handiwork. His is the finest craftsmanship. Souls which the world has cast away as unusable he has made the finest of carvings out of. He has been the salvation of all who would call on him. None unworthy. He has put to death *death* itself! We must indeed rejoice in our salvation, a salvation wholly foreign to ourselves; if the salvation that rescues a drowning man brings about the song of thanksgiving we find in this passage of Jonah, how much greater ought our song of thanksgiving be!

Conclusion

Today we have heard read and proclaimed a fantastic story, not simply the one about the whale that swallowed up for three days a poor prophet, but the better one to which it points. Christ proclaims to the entire world a coming judgment, but indeed not without saying he is the means by which it is delivered. Jonah was rescued by the whale and spent three days in its belly; the saints of God are rescued by Christ who spent three days in the belly of death – indeed he is not just our Jonah, he is our whale. Let us give thanksgiving now, and throughout this week at this inestimable grace. Cherish these thoughts of deliverance, so that you might know that our God is a mighty fortress and strong to save (Ps 31).

If you sense the sea foaming above you, your head tangled in seaweed – God will be quick to remedy your plight if you cry out to him.

May the Spirit fix firm these truths upon our heart that we would be inclined to the humility, holiness, and wholeness for which we have been set free to partake of in Christ, our Prophet and our Deliverance.

Amen.