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Reckless Love: Jonah

His Fish

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Review: Jonah was a prophet of the Lord. God called him to preach to the bloodthirsty Ninevites. Instead, Jonah sailed in the other direction. But God hurled a great storm upon the sea and stopped that boat dead in its tracks. Jonah told the sailors the only way they would be saved was if they threw him overboard. Reluctantly, they agreed, and the storm ceased its raging. The pagan sailors were so astonished by Jonah's sacrifice and the resulting calm that they became followers of the Lord. Meanwhile, Jonah, who was their first sacrifice, is sinking down, down, down to his own death.

When our Rachel was about three years old, we were invited to a backstage tour of the Beluga Whale exhibit at Pt. Defiance Zoo. We got right up to the pool and they called over one of the Belugas, Mayak. She was gorgeous...and huge. I lifted Rachel onto the edge of the pool. At first, she was intimidated. Mayak swam right up to Rachel...with her mouth wide open! As if Rachel were a party snack. Actually, she was offering her tongue to be scratched. They like that. After a slight hesitation, Rachel reached her little hand into that huge mouth and touched the tongue. When nothing bad happened, Rachel REALLY started scratching away. Soon, she was giggling and delighted and completely lost in the experience. So lost, in fact, that she kept leaning...and leaning...and leaning forward. Until suddenly, Rachel slipped right off the edge of the pool towards Mayak's gaping maw.

Of course, I was watching the whole time. I saw what was happening to my ever-eager daughter. When she slipped, I caught her and pulled her back to safety. But she whipped around, eyes on fire, and said to me, "Daddy...stop pushing me!" She was convinced I had shoved her into that whale's mouth. Of course, the truth was, her daddy SAVED her from going into the whale's mouth.

Well, Jonah's heavenly father saved him BY pushing him into a whale's mouth. Let's jump right in (get it?) to the most familiar ...and most controversial verse in this book: 1:17: 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....

Out of the 58 verses in this book, THIS is the one everybody remembers. And that many stumble over. Some people can't get past the biological difficulties of this passage. What fish could swallow a man whole? And even if it could, what man could survive inside a fish for three days? Some dismiss the whole thing as mythological poppycock. Others consider Jonah to be an historical character but this part of the story to be a parable; it didn't actually happen but is used to teach us spiritual principles. Still others view Jonah and the fish to be historical.

I'll just touch on this...and then we can move on to the more important truths. First, the Hebrew language is imprecise enough that "great fish" could also mean "whale." There **are** whales large enough to swallow a human being. In fact, there was a report in the late 19th century that a crewman on a whaling ship went overboard, was swallowed by a sperm whale and was later cut out of its belly alive by some very surprised crewmates. So, it's possible.

But I accept this story at face value for another reason: Jesus accepted it at face value.

“An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 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.” Matthew 12: 39-40

Jesus used the miracle of Jonah’s going into and coming out of the fish to predict the greater miracle of his own death, burial and resurrection. Believing this fish story is not that big a deal for me because I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. If God is big enough to do that, he can custom-make a fish to save a prophet. And if you DON’T believe in the resurrection of Jesus, then, frankly, the Jonah miracle doesn’t matter anyway, does it?

Anyhow, this is the story scripture presents to us. So let’s move past verse 17 and see what God wants us to learn from it. Let me ask this; has anyone here ever come close to drowning? What a horrible experience that must be. As we listen to Jonah’s prayer —you are listening to a man describing his own drowning. Listen for the panic in his voice...and I want you to listen for a surprising glimmer of hope: (2:1 ff.)

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 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.

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. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;

When the captain asked Jonah to pray to his god that the ship might be saved, he didn’t pray. But now that he’s been thrown overboard, he’s praying. He declares that he’s in the sea because God threw him in. Of course, we know it was the sailors who pitched him, but Jonah is testifying that this really God’s work. God was not willing to let him run away from the call upon his life. If it meant throwing him into the ocean to get his attention, God’s willing to do that.

And it is a very vivid description. As the prayer progresses, the words take us deeper and deeper into the water. We start near the surface. “You cast me into...the flood surrounded...” Then we drop beneath the water: “...the waves passed over me...” Then we are sinking, strangled by kelp: “...the deep surrounded me...weeds were wrapped about my head near the roots of the mountains.” Finally, we hit bottom: I went DOWN to the land whose bars closed upon me forever. Do you remember when Jonah first ran away from the Lord? The writer kept using the word “down” to describe his death spiral? Well, Jonah is STILL going down... down, down, down as far as he can go. He describes the bottom of the sea as a jail whose bars closed upon me forever.

This is the language of death. Jonah is as good as dead. How terrifying to drop like a rock, seaweed wrapped around your neck, strangling you, down to a place so low that the very roots of the mountains are visible before your fading eyes.

Hopelessness. All hope is lost, right? EXCEPT!!!! For one little verse. Smack dab in the middle in verse 4, we find a glimmer of hope. Even though Jonah has been driven away from God’s sight...and is on his way to the bottom of the ocean...we hear this faith-filled affirmation: “Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.” How can this be? You are drowning. You’re fish food! And yet you speak with hope of one day returning to Jerusalem? What’s going on here?

Well...in Hebrew poetry, the middle verse is often the punchline! We put our punchlines at the end of a story. But Hebrew poetry builds UP to the punchline...TELLS the punchline...and then retreats from the punchline. So this little hint in verse 4...the hope of seeing Jerusalem again... is important...because God is about to deliver Jonah!

...yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!

Apparently, Jonah has learned his lesson. Because then we read, "And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."

The first half of the prayer describes Jonah's distress; the second half describes his deliverance. The Lord brought him up from the pit. He was drowning, fainting away...and God heard his feeble prayers. And saved him. Salvation belongs to the Lord! Which is true...and wonderful...and could you just remind me...WHERE is Jonah praying this prayer? In the belly of a fish! God saved him from drowning all right...but talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire! How can he be so sure he will get out of that fish? How can he be sure that he will worship in the temple once again? But...unlikely as it seems, Jonah is convinced that the God who saved him from drowning by sending a fish...will finish the job of his salvation.

There's something remarkable about this prayer. It is a song of thanksgiving. Even though Jonah is still in dire straits...he's sitting in the belly of a fish...Jonah offers up a prayer of thanksgiving to the God who saved him from the ocean...and who will save him from the fish, too.

This illustrates a might prayer principle: the power of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving regardless of the situation! Thanksgiving in the good times, of course. But even more, thanksgiving when things are hard. Thanksgiving when things are hopeless. Thanksgiving when you are in the belly of your beast.

The Apostle Paul taught this. He was sitting in a prison waiting to have his head cut off and wrote to his Philippian friends, "...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Whatever you are facing, saturate every prayer you offer with thanksgiving! And to the Thessalonians Paul wrote, "...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." That's even stronger. No matter what you are facing, Paul says, you can find SOMETHING in that situation for which to give thanks.

But Paul really goes radical with the Ephesians: "...[give] thanks always and for everything...." Don't just give thanks IN everything; "...give thanks FOR everything." Really, Paul? Give thanks FOR my cancer? For my divorce? For my drug-addicted child? For my lost job? For the death of my beloved? REALLY? Paul says YES. Jonah says YES. BECAUSE ...and here's the point... the belly of the beast might be your salvation! In ways you cannot even know. That rancid, stinky, disgusting, seemingly irredeemable situation in which you find yourself...might just be the means by which Almighty God is going to save you for a purpose greater than you could ever imagine.

Ten years ago I was in the middle of an employment discrimination lawsuit filed against the church and me. It was the hardest thing I have ever experienced. It felt evil, unjust and tragically wasteful. It was so devastating that I became clinically depressed. Thank God for my Cyndi. She fasted. She prayed. She encouraged. AND she created a CD of praise music. Every song was about thanking God in the midst of the storm. Every day as we drove to the courthouse, we played that music over and over again. We FELT like we were in the Belly of the Beast. And...we chose to thank God for it.

Honestly, I am still not sure why God allowed that to occur. It was so painful. But I believe He used that to shape me...to humble me...to prepare me...for my future. In ways I can't even understand. And I know this: when I was in the Belly of my Beast, the thanksgiving I chose to offer up... it reminded me of God's salvation.

Imagine sitting for three days and nights in an air sac inside a giant fish...soaking in digestive juices and rotting fish corpses. You have every reason to complain, every reason to whine, every reason to curse the god you think has abandoned you. Instead, you choose another way. Right there...sitting in the corrosive juices that engulf you...you decide to believe God. You decide to praise God. You decide to offer thanksgiving to the God who created that fish...and appointed it to swallow you up for a time. You choose to thank him for it.

Here's what you declare when you choose to offer thanksgiving from the Belly of your Beast. "What God has allowed to swallow me... will one day spit me out. What God has allowed to imprison me, will one day set me free. What God has allowed to triumph over me, will one day be defeated. This ...too... shall ...pass." When you praise God from the Belly of the Beast...it makes you indigestible! When you sing...when you praise...when you remain hopeful...when you speak words of faith and future...when the beast that is trying to chew you up discovers that your response is not terror-stricken but rather thankful and hopeful and God-honoring...that makes you indigestible. And you might end up being spit out a lot faster than you would have otherwise.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but Jonah teaches us that when we find ourselves in the Belly of the Beast...in stinky, rancid, dark and hopeless times...the very best response is thanksgiving! Because that beastly situation might be the means of your salvation; of your redemption; of your restoration. May I just remind you of the cross. Who could have found anything praiseworthy about the cross of Jesus? Yet look what God did through that. Even in...even through...even for the hardest moments of our life, we live with thanksgiving. We pray thanksgiving. We claim a future that seems impossible from the present you now know...because "salvation is the Lord's."