

May 14, 2017
Lesson 11: Jonah 2
God's Love Preserved Jonah

Context:

Our scripture reading this morning continues with the story of Jonah. Last week we read of Jonah being tossed overboard after the sailors discovered he was running from God. As the sea was calmed, a large fish swallowed Jonah. For three days and three nights, Jonah stayed in the belly of the large fish.

Today we get a glimpse of what might have happened as Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish. One could imagine that it was not the most pleasant experiences. Jonah sat in a dark, cavern with the stench of seaweed and probably rotting smaller fish. Water would rush in filling Jonah's lungs with stiff sea salt air. And with no view of the sun and being able to tell the time of day, the minutes turned into endless hours that made the trip even more tumultuous.

It is there in that deep place that we hear Jonah cry out to God about his predicament. Like most prophets and monologues in the Old Testament, we hear Jonah lament about the plight in front of him. He cries out about being in the fish's belly and about the fact that he may never see outside the belly of the fish. In the midst of it, he has a cry of repentance and a call for God's endurance to give him strength in that time. He makes a promise that he will offer his thanks to God and that he will pay back what is given to him. Deliverance only comes from God, the one who saves and hears prayers. And suddenly, the Lord speaks to the fish and Jonah is vomited back onto the dry land. Like a cliffhanger, one wonders what Jonah will do after being spit up onto dry land.

Application:

What an adventure for Jonah! One day he is on a ship and the next day he finds himself in the belly of a large fish. Only to be "vomited" back up and put onto dry land. It is a fun story to imagine and one that we often relegate to telling as a great children's story. Who doesn't like to imagine a large fish swallowing someone up and then being spit back up onto land? And usually when we picture the large fish, we have the perfect image of a whale that pops up for the poster and in the picture story Bibles. For VBS you can even tell the story and then make blue kool-aid and goldfish as the snack for the day.

But often in the VBS retelling of the story, we gloss over the eloquent prayer that Jonah prays in the belly of that large fish. If we read back over the story though, we can glean some things from Jonah's prayer and even how he understands his predicament. Like the Psalmist he cries out for God to deliver him from all that happens. He feels as if he is in a pit and he cries out to God to help him. All is followed with a pledge to sacrifice to God and to pay back with deliverance.

As I read back over this story, I could not help but think of the days in middle or high school where you did not study enough for a test and you knew it. And so you had the final prayer as the tests were being handed out making a promise to God that you would "pray more, go to church more, keep curfew, cuss less, (you fill in the blank with choice of sin)" if you were able to get a good grade on the test or just pass the class. It was a prayer I said occasionally and my peers would eventually confess to the same thing for those particular subjects we just did not like. And sometimes it would be an easier test

and all you had were bad nerves, and other times you felt the grace of your teacher's red pen that gave a nice bell curve for the whole class. Or other times you would discover that grace was the fact that your teacher gave points for you spelling your name properly.

Whether you repented or not, you discovered something new out of the experience. Maybe that you could study more, or that you just had a case of nerves. Or maybe that your teacher was kinder than you thought and that their job was to push you a little more. They gave you grace, something you did not deserve or earn, but something in which you could learn from your experience.

That's what we see hear in the story today. Even though Jonah knew he messed up and was now in a predicament, God was still listening and was there with Jonah. I imagine that while God did hear Jonah's prayer, God knew that the experience for Jonah was one where he would grow. Even as he sat in the belly of a large fish in the dark and murky waters, Jonah was able to think about his decision and to turn around with a new outlook on life.

As a pastor, I often have people who come into my office and will confess some of the things that they've done. Some come with trepidation at revealing those parts of themselves and others feel the release of processing it with someone. Some come out directly to me to ask what I think about their behavior or decisions. Perhaps the ones I remember the most though are where people feel as if their sin or deed has completely blocked them from God. I have heard people think that because of the things they have done or said, they think that they may be eternally damned. They wonder if God could ever love them or if there is any hope for them in the future. That is where I get to enjoy my job as I remind them that God loves them and that because of grace, we are given new opportunities every day for living. Of course as humans we mess up and we sin; it is part of the human experience. And while we cannot erase the sin or deed, we can learn from them and recall their stories to help with others when they may face the same situation or predicament. Like Jonah, we are given a second (and a third and a fourth) chance to know that no matter how hard we may mess, God is with us to pick up the pieces and to strive to be better disciples of Jesus.

So what prayer do you offer up before God today? Is it a prayer of repentance, of deliverance, or a plea for guidance? Whatever it may be, listen closely and you may hear God calling you to use your story or your experience to share with other and God is still at work in your life and those around you.