

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans
“Crying out...”
Jonah 2: 1-10
Pastor Jonathan

November 3, 2019
Communion Sunday

What do you believe about prayer? Why do you pray? Does prayer accomplish the will of God? How persistent is prayer in your life? What does prayer look like in your life? Do you have a dedicated space in your home for praying? Do you pray in the morning and the evening and at meals? How do you know if God is answering your prayers? Do you pray differently when you are facing a crisis?

There are times in our lives, when we face crises. We do not look forward to these times. They just happen. Sometimes we ask, “Where is God?” in the midst of our crises, even when we may know intellectually He is near, but don’t understand the pain and the suffering. This is particularly true when it is not our own pain and suffering, but that of someone close to us. This is true when the person close to us is experiencing bodily, physical pain; or when they are experiencing mental anguish of some kind.

I’m sure Jonah is experiencing an intense reflection on his predicament, as he has been swallowed by a fish. Have you ever been confined, against your will, in a place or relationship or circumstance from which you could not escape?

My friend in another province learned that he was adopted. He learned this late in life. He found his birth mother and met her, and was determined to find his birth father. He came close to doing so, and even found out the exact address in a certain city where he lived. In fact, many people had told him that he looks like his biological father, and walks like his biological father...but even when he could see that person a few feet away from him in the airport, he couldn’t bring himself to say “Hello, I’m your son...” And of course, his biological father had not taken steps to meet or greet him either, as far as we know.

There are constricted relationships in our lives that may be difficult to explain or to work out, whether we think we are able to work them out or not. There are times where we simply don’t know where to go or what to do. And when you don’t know what to do, do you know what to do? Pray.

Now a prophet like Jonah doesn't need to be asked to pray. Prayer is his life. But we need to hear again, both you and I, "Your sin is never too great, your predicament is never too difficult for God."

Did Jonah die in that fish? Did God revive him and cause the fish to vomit Jonah up onto the nearby beach? We know the latter (v. 10), but we don't know the former.

No matter how close Jonah was to dying, whether due to the drowning, or the intestinal juices of the fish, or a lack of air, we simply receive an account of a prayer of the man who was swallowed by a fish. It was almost a kind of natural justice for all those fish that had been swallowed by fisherman and their customers. It was almost a joke. But it wasn't so funny for Jonah. He had time to consider his sins, even as God's spokesperson and representative.

So he prays. I'm thinking he said it out loud. Of course, the account must be from Jonah himself, since there were no hidden cameras or microphones. And the Scriptures say, "He said..." (v. 2)

Where does he start his prayer? Where do you start your prayers in crisis? I usually use the short form of prayer, "Help!"

But just like with the sailors, Jonah starts his prayer with vulnerability and honesty, two wonderful traits, essential for prayer, and for Christians and human beings in general. He says, "In my distress, I called to the Lord..." (v. 2) It's hard to think of a more distressing circumstance than to have been thrown off your cruise ship by the crew into the stormy seas, sinking fairly deep and wondering if it was the end.

In our distress, what do we do? I know I can get anxious, angry and upset in many ways. How about you? Prayer takes our eyes off ourselves for a few minutes, and asks the Lord to work, and to do what we cannot do. Certainly prayers in the hospital are that way. Prayers in prison are that way. Prayers in individual homes are that way. In distress, we can know hope...as we turn to the Lord.

Even if we feel "buried alive," as Jonah did, (v. 2) we can know that God answers us, and listens to our cry. Cry out to Him. Jonah actually prays, "in the depths of *Sheol*, I called for help..." (v. 2) The NIV team translates the

Hebrew *Sheol* with “the grave.” It is the place where the dead go and it is debated in scholarly work. Nevertheless, Jonah felt buried alive in that fish. And I have to say, that I have some kind of claustrophobia, fear of being trapped in small spaces. I think of serving on a submarine, for six months, mostly underwater, would be my closest experience to hell on earth. I can’t even imagine taking a “tour” of the submarine while it is docked, and on the surface of the water. That’s my fear. What fears do you have, or are aware of? What would God do for you in the midst of your fear(s)?

Jonah speaks directly to God. He notes that God threw him into the sea, that it is God’s water, currents, waves and breakers; that swept over him. Now we know the sailors threw him into the sea. But these were God’s instruments and so is the fish and the sea itself. Jonah speaks to God personally, acknowledging God’s hand in the details of his journey. Can you do the same? Do you have an account of how God has met you, delivered you, redeemed you, and continues to lead you? It is good to work on one if you have not composed it on paper or in your mind.

Jonah refers to his banishment, being “banished from God’s sight,” but interestingly, that was his choice, not God’s. He was the one running away. But then God caught up with him, and caught him. How is God doing that with you today? In this season of life, how is God doing that in your life?

Jonah begins to turn his heart back toward God, noting God’s faithfulness, in v. 2, that God answers prayer, that God listens to our cries, and then in v. 4 Jonah chooses to “look again toward God’s holy temple” which is a picture of worship. And also why many physical sanctuaries, i.e. church buildings of Christian churches would have an orientation toward the east, toward Jerusalem. So when you are in the midst of a crisis or challenge, remember anew that God is with you, He hears your cry, He is answering you, and as you worship, you will remember again that your life is in Him, and your hope and your mission in life is in Him.

Jonah quotes several of David’s Psalms throughout this prayer, as we might quote Scripture in our prayers, he admits that the waters have overwhelmed him and that seaweed has wrapped around him, that he is sunk, but that God can bring him out of this pit, and will again. (vv. 5-6)

Jonah’s prayer is directed to God while his life is ebbing away, remembering God’s faithfulness, and worshipping Him in the midst of the crisis, in the

fish. He acknowledges that idolatry, settling for other gods, is not the way forward, and that idolatry is the path away from the grace of God. He chooses instead to worship. And how does he worship God in that fish?

“With a song of thanksgiving,” “will I sacrifice to You,” and “what I have vowed,” “I will make good.” (v. 9) He sings a hymn or worship song, perhaps a psalm at that time, maybe Psalm 100. Like you and I have done here in the last extended season of Thanksgiving.

Singing increases your lifespan, singing in groups is even better. God has made us to sing, and allows our memories to remember long pieces of text through song, where we find it more difficult to memorize Scripture with straight words. Sing to the Lord. Sing to Him: “Salvation comes from the LORD.”

And then finally, we have personal confession in his prayer, in v. 9. “Okay, God,” Jonah says, “I’ll do what you wanted me to do in the first place, go to Nineveh, and preach what you want me to preach...” This is my translation of “What I have vowed I will make good...”

At which point, the fish is given indigestion by God. I’m not sure you’ve ever thought of indigestion as a gift from God, but certainly Jonah was feeling that way when he found himself lying on the beach with a second chance.

A lot of us simply need a second chance (or possibly a third or fourth one). Jonah got his second chance.

We don’t know how far that beach was from Iraq, likely a good distance. But Jonah was back on dry ground, and he was determined to follow God this time. You too determine to follow God. Say this to Him at His table today. I will follow you, no matter what it costs. And of course, only say this if you mean it.

We meet the God who pursues us beyond what we deserve today. We meet the God who pursued Jonah. What does He need to do in your life to get your attention? What is He already doing in your life to get your attention?

Let us trust Him together. Let us pray.