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*“Paradigm Shift in the Belly of a Whale”*

*Jonah 2*

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Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying,

“I called to the LORD out of my distress,  
and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Then I said, ‘I am driven away  
from your sight;  
how<sup>a</sup> shall I look again  
upon your holy temple?’

<sup>5</sup>The waters closed in over me;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped around my head

<sup>6</sup> 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.



<sup>7</sup> As my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered the LORD;  
and my prayer came to you,  
into your holy temple.  
<sup>8</sup> Those who worship vain idols  
forsake their true loyalty.  
<sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

<sup>10</sup> Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.



I am sure you've seen some of the humorous observations making the rounds these days. Here's a few:

- "Somewhere out there is a kid that brought home the class hamster for the weekend. The parents are not happy."
- Another one: "Apparently, this year is being written by Stephen King."
- Another one: "[My dog looked at me and asked, 'Now do you understand why I want to chew the furniture?'](#)"
- I'll quit with this fashion tip: "Day Pajamas are not to be worn past 8:00 pm."

As they say, "[I have a lot more where those came from.](#)"

But, is this the time for jokes? Of course, most all of us have enjoyed humorous videos and emails that help relieve the stress. And some are flourishing in this time of lasting Sabbath-rest, finding outlets for long put off projects and creative pursuits, enjoying the extra time with family and finding plenty of reasons to enjoy life. Buster, how's the carving going? Wilson, are you good enough on the banjo to play for others? Rachel, where did this songwriting and painting talent come from? And how much bigger do some basements and attics look now that you cleaned them out?

But this pandemic *is* serious and is hitting some people quite hard. Many worry about its spread, about the economic impact, about jobs or making payments, or about loved ones. A *sermon* is not to entertain but is supposed to speak some needed Word of the Lord—offering wisdom, comfort, insight, or guidance.

And then there is this, and you've heard me say it before: Though I love humor in sermons, I won't normally tell jokes.

The reason I began with those humorous observations was simply to set the context for a choice made by the writer of the book of Jonah.

Jonah was written about a painful chapter in Israel's history... and was written in a way to *get people laughing*. The writer wants his readers to laugh—not to take their mind off things; or because if you don't laugh, you cry; or even to entertain—but rather to get past defenses and underneath



prejudices and opinions so that maybe some more light of grace can shine in how they see the world and others around them.

And so, the writer plays “What If” with a dark chapter of Israel’s history. We’ve seen this approach with a movie made not too long ago. Quentin Tarantino made a movie with a two-word title that I cannot repeat from the pulpit. The movie imagines history playing out differently than it did. An odd mixture of soldiers and civilians assassinate Hitler before his regime could cause all the carnage it actually did. There is humor in the movie and it all plays off the fantasy of revenge.

Jonah takes the same approach. The story begins with the Hebrew word, “*vayehi*,” which means, “[And it came to pass.](#)” That beginning lets us know there is a “Once Upon a Time” flavor to the tale being told.

Where Jonah differs from Tarantino’s movie is that the movie uses humor to feed the fantasy of revenge. Jonah uses humor to oppose the fantasy of revenge.

Jonah’s story takes place three centuries before the book is written. The setting is before the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Looming large is the growing power of Assyria. Keep in mind that what actually happened is that Assyria attacked the northern nation of Israel and then, cruelly through genocide and the most extreme social distancing of its exiles, destroyed the identity of its ten tribes. They became known as the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.”

I’ll fly through the well-known story.

God calls Jonah, a prophet, to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and let the people know that unless they repent of their evil ways they will be destroyed. Jonah is **revulsed** at the idea of this working so, instead of booking passage to travel east to Nineveh, he books passage to travel west to Tarshish.

Running away from God doesn’t work out. While at sea, there is such a terrible storm the ship is on the verge of breaking apart. Jonah offers a solution. He tells them why they are in this fix and suggests they throw him overboard. Jonah is tossed, and two surprising things happen:

First, the skies clear and the sea calms.

And, second, Jonah is swallowed by what the text says is a fish, but I’m going to stick to the story of my childhood and say, “whale.”

Talk about social isolation. In the belly of the whale, Jonah

- has no one to see or talk to,
- nothing to do,
- and nowhere to go... even to get away.

He practices a spiritual discipline he might have neglected when his life was full. *He prays.* He assesses his life and the direction he was headed and realizes it just isn’t going to work out the way he thought it would. He gives in. He tells God, “[Ok. I’ll do it, I will go to Nineveh.](#)” The whale then swims to the Assyrian shore and spits Jonah out.

Give Jonah credit. In the belly of the whale, he goes through one of those paradigm shifts: he faces reality, adapts, and changes direction. He does what he needs to do.



But, the story tells us that Jonah's journey is not over. It is with a bad attitude that Jonah lives his new life. After washing and disinfecting himself after his cruise, he doesn't go to the center of the city where people of influence can hear him, but to the outskirts. There in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven across from the Jiffy Lube he mumbles what God told him to say: that unless they repent, they will be destroyed.

He then quits, but his message doesn't. It becomes viral, a Gospel Pandemic. Some hear it, believe it and spread it. His message somehow gets to Assyria's king and lo and behold, the king repents. The nation repents. Assyria is saved.

You'd think Jonah would be pleased with a job well done—or rather a job *poorly* but successfully done, but Jonah is **angry** it works. He lets God know he doesn't like it: “I knew this would happen. This is why I wanted to go to Tarshish because I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to lose your temper, full of love, and you'd rather see bad people saved than destroyed. I'd rather die than see that happen.”

When God responds, God sounds like a scolding parent, “Listen to yourself. Are you proud of the way you're acting now?”

Jonah then acts like a spoiled child. He storms away to where he thinks he can be by himself, plops down and pouts. God then kills a tree shading Jonah. Jonah lashes out at God again, this time for killing the plant. And God asks, “You want me to pity the plant, but you don't want me to show pity on 120,000 people?”



Jonah's changed direction, because he had to, but he has yet to find joy.

Jonah's readers are far removed from the day northern Israel fell to Assyria and southern Judah fell to Babylon. Some even have returned from Exile to live in the territory of Israel. Many live with purpose and joy. But the writer sees those who live with resentment, clinging to old grudges. Through his Jonah story, the writer encourages them to consider that maybe it is time to live into the future rather than cling to the past. “Find some joy. Find ways to explore and embrace life in the world you now live in, with all its limitations and possibilities. And begin by opening your heart to those around you.”



We are in something of the belly of a whale now, aren't we? Whatever it is that we are in these days, it is not the normal we had two months ago, nor is it the normal to which we will one day arrive. Think back over the last six weeks and all the unforeseen things we thought were going to happen suddenly not happening. I think it really began to dawn on the nation as a whole that we really are in something different with sports when, within a few days, conference tournaments were halted in the middle, an entire NCAA tournament was cancelled, and professional hockey and basketball seasons brought to a screeching halt. Then came schools closing, shuttering of nonessential businesses, bans on assemblies of more than 10, Easter with empty sanctuaries...

- How many parents anticipated homeschooling their children?
- How many businesses were planning for a pandemic?



- How many thought that their family gatherings would be through Zoom?
- How many churches thought they would become an online ministry?

We are in the belly of the whale in that life as we knew it is in somewhat of a pause, and we somehow already know that when we get spit out, it won't be back into the world as we knew it.

I think most all of us have accepted that. But, how many expect that life can be as rich and full as it was before?

If you have a broad newsfeed on your Facebook page, you can see a division already happening. There are some sinking into blame and growing deeper into their resentments against others. And then there are those who, though careful, worried, and even upset with how some are reacting, are still celebrating any evidence of coming together to meet this challenge and of evidence of compassion toward those most affected. You see them celebrating caregivers and everyday workers who make it possible to buy groceries.

My challenge is this: Which Jonah will I be? There is the Jonah of acceptance who was doing what he needed to do but was stuck in a pout. And then there is the Jonah who was supposed to be, the Jonah who in the belly of the whale promised something to God; a promise that at the end of the story he has yet to keep. At the end of his prayer, he promised not only to do what he needed to do, but to *do it with thanksgiving*.

Don't be harsh with Jonah... unless you want to be harsh with me. Getting to joy is a journey that inevitably involves spiritual side trips into places like confusion, anxiety, pain and grief.

To be who Jonah wanted to be in his prayer, let's take heart in role models. The writer would point to those who in Exile found ways to get along with neighbors whose ancestors were enemies, be productive in building the communities around them, and live with joy that often involved a lot of laughter.

Or look to modern role models. We have among us those who have gone through major personal transformations involving difficult chapters.

- Marriage broken, but then healed.  
Or marriage ended, but new life with new love found.
- Job lost, but then live going on and a new role in life found.
- Grieving the death of loved ones, but life becoming even more precious.

If our aim is to be thankful again, maybe enough of us in this nation and world can come together to craft a better normal.

Can we redeem our health care system?

Can we rescue or at least restore jobs?

Can we find new ways for people to work?

Can we grow closer as families and appreciate friends?

Can we notice how clear is the view and how refreshing are breaths

and then find ways to take better care of our planet?

Can we learn again how critical are the things we find so easy to abandon,



but which now are so freshly important to many of us:  
prayer, worship, and showing kindness to those in need.

I am not a utopian. I mean, I'm a Calvinist.  
I'm not trying to pretend all is good,  
I am only saying that *God is good* and there is good to be found.  
I am not saying we won't blow it.

We will,  
we always do,  
and it is usually power and money lust  
and fear and resentment that get us going in the wrong direction  
and lead us to our worst selves.  
But I am saying that we have the chance to  
do better,  
live better,  
and maybe become more of who God intends for us to be.

We have a chance to grow more dependent on God's grace and more grateful for those who love us and those we love... and even grateful for those we should love. And I know there will be times to cry as well as laugh, times to grieve as well as rejoice. But maybe Jonah reminds us that in real life we can usually do both.  
Even in times of crying,  
we can find reasons to laugh;  
and even when we know life is good and we give thanks,  
we can remember those who are suffering and overwhelmed,  
and help hold them up.

Let's hold each other up and get to that better place together.

