

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

February 28, 2021, The Second Sunday of Lent

Matthew 7:1-11, Jonah 2

**LENTEN SERMON SERIES: "THE SIGN OF JONAH—
PRAYING IN THE BELLY OF THE GREAT BIG FISH"**

What is the prayer of the dying? If you have ever sat by the side of someone who was dying, what was it like?

My friend, the Rev. Judy Anderson Bauer, who is a Lutheran pastor in Duluth, tells the story of an older member of her church named John, who was dying.

John's wife had died 6 years earlier, but he had still gotten himself to church each week, always dressed in a suit and tie.

His health had remained pretty good, and she says he seemed like the wise old elder who would be with them forever.

Then, quite suddenly, his kidneys failed, and he went on dialysis.

He put up with that for about a month, going three times a week, and sitting for the 3-4 hours it took for his blood to be cleaned by the machines.

Each time he went, he grew weaker and weaker, and he hated the process.

He finally got to the point where he said, "Enough."

He talked with his family, and they agreed that he was in his right mind and they would support his decision.

He was hospitalized and Judy visited him every day for nearly a week, as his body starting shutting down, one organ at a time.

One of the last days she visited him, he grasped her hand tightly. John had always been a strong man. His eyes bored into her, and he said, "Tell me."

She paused a moment, choosing her words.

John was impatient and said again, "Tell me."

She knew what he was asking. John was asking her to reassure him that it was going to be all right, that he was loved and that this death would not be the end.

So, to answer him, my dear friend began to sing – *"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."*

Then she read Psalm 23 to him, and then they prayed,

and John joined her as they prayed the Lord's Prayer.

That evening he slipped into a coma, and John died the next day.

What is the prayer of the dying? Jonah is sloshing around in the belly of the great, big fish after almost drowning in the storm at sea.

And now after 3 days and 3 nights, the terror and the fear have probably receded a bit, and now there is the resignation that he is facing his death, alone in the dark and the cold.

He had tried to run away from God, and it hadn't worked out very well.

At this point, he is probably pretty certain that he will die in the belly of the fish.

His words are all about that, about being in a scary place, and about trusting that God will still care for him.

"Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head. . . . I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever . . . As my life was ebbing away, I remembered

the Lord; and my prayer came to you. . .”

As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord. . . This Psalm - because that's what it is, a song of confession – this Psalm is Jonah's last will and testament, it is his confession of both his sin and of his faith.

This is sort of like Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the face of death, in the face of THE END, Jesus and Jonah both
cast all their hopes, all their fears, all their faith onto God's mercy and love.

Remember, Jonah doesn't pray this knowing he will be spit out on dry land and go to Nineveh. Jonah prays this precisely because he is sure he will never see the world outside of this big fish again,
and he leans back on his faith in God and God's goodness and love.
Like the church member John who was dying,
Jonah is singing his version of "Amazing Grace,"
singing his confession of his own lost-ness and God's never-failing mercy and deliverance.

None of us knows how we will face our death. One of the realities of this year of the world pandemic is that many of us have wondered this for ourselves, and for those we love. Wondering about death and dying has been a painful undercurrent of this past year.

We wonder, will we be in a hospital room, or at home, or in a nursing home.
Nor do we know how we will face that moment,
a moment we all have to face sometime.

We hope and pray that we can face it with courage, with hope and with faith.

In this season of Covid, when we have known the profound heartbreak of people dying alone, we pray that we will be able to hold the hand of someone we love.

And whenever our time comes, may we may be able to ask someone to tell us the old, old story,

the story that goes back to the beginning of the universe,
the story that goes back to Jesus' cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb
of Easter morning
the old, eternal, ever-new story of God's great, boundless love.

May we know now, and when each of our times come, that,
however, we have failed in our lives, we are forgiven and free,
that God does not count our failures and our misdeeds against us,
that though we have at times been swallowed by big fish,
though we have been lost,
God has found us in Jesus Christ,
and called us by name and loved us,
and will keep God's promises to bring us safely home, when
our time comes. AMEN

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