

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**February 21, 2021, The First Sunday of Lent**

Matthew 8:23-27, Jonah 1:4-17

**LENTEN SERMON SERIES: "THE SIGN OF JONAH --- SAVED IN THE STORM"**

During the Season of Lent we are going to be journeying with the prophet Jonah. This sermon series is a collaboration of a Creative Communications series from many years ago, and my friend, the Rev. Judy Anderson-Bauer who is a Lutheran pastor in Duluth, MN. I am thankful for the insight of both sources!

This week, on Ash Wednesday, as we entered into Lent, we met the prophet Jonah, in his short 4-chapter book. As I told you then, the big story in this little book is God's love and grace that we hear in a story that is both a drama and a comedy. Jonah's story leaves us with mental images that we don't soon forget once we've heard them.

The image of Jonah in the belly of the big fish was such a powerful one that Jesus used it when he taught people about who he was hundreds of years later. (See: Matthew 12:38-41, 16:4, Luke 11:29-30)

On Ash Wednesday we met Jonah, running away from God, who had called him to go to the people of Ninevah to tell them it was time to change their ways.

Now this morning we meet Jonah again, floating in the ocean in the midst of a big storm, waiting to drown, when along comes a passing fish. A reeeeealy big fish. That swallowed him up. And why did this really big fish swallow him up?...Because God cares.

So, do you think Jonah felt himself blessed when God just happened to provide a great big fish to swallow him up?

Do you think Jonah was feeling grateful to God as he sloshed around in the belly of the fish?

You can only imagine the smell!

Jonah had plenty of time to contemplate his life, in the dark and the stink.

Next week we'll hear Jonah's prayer from the belly of the great big fish,

but given that he was in the fish 72 hours or so,

and the prayer only takes about 2 minutes to pray,

my guess is that there may have been other, slightly less polite things Jonah had to say to God during that long, dark, death-like time.

Remember that Jonah didn't know what we know,

he had no idea if he would ever see dry land again,

much less ever breath fresh air or eat a decent meal.

Jonah died, for all intents and purposes, during those three days in the belly of the fish. Because in order for there to be new life, there first has to be a death.

We started the passage with the sailors, who were frightened, and who knew that the storm they were battling was no natural phenomenon.

Once they figured out that it was the very quiet passenger who was responsible for their plight, they asked him about himself and why this was happening.

Jonah comes off sounding rather stuck up. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the

sea and the dry land.” Implied in this is – “and you don’t!”

But who is it, in this awful storm, who behaves with the most integrity – this God-believer Jonah or the unbelieving sailors? The sailors do everything possible to save Jonah’s life, risking their own lives in the process.

Meanwhile, Jonah, who could have jumped overboard himself, makes the sailors throw him into the sea.

Over and over in this story, it is the unbelievers, the heathen who act with integrity.

Jonah just can’t seem to do the right thing,  
even when he’s given the perfect opportunity.

Jonah acted like a self-centered, egoistical, self-righteous jerk. Remember that when the storm started, he went down into the hold to take a nap. He left the work to the sailors.

And then when asked about who he was, and what was going on, he told them he followed a really big God who made the land and the sea, and they didn’t.

BUT, who ended up being swallowed by a huge fish.

Some might say – served him right.

But God wasn’t done with Jonah yet.

Sometimes, it seems, at least in my life, that it is in the worst events, the things I would never choose, that I find the most grace and the most mercy. That doesn’t mean that those were good things. Far from it.

Nor does it mean, I think, that God sends horrible things into our lives.

For instance, some are saying that God caused this world pandemic to teach us something. I believe that is an atrocious lie and a misrepresentation of God.

Because God always is a God of mercy and love.

If it’s true that we see God most clearly in the person of Jesus,  
then we see that God is always working to bring about  
healing and health and wholeness and life.

Disease and illness and brokenness and death are certainly part of this world.

That doesn’t stop God from working to bring:

goodness out of evil,  
healing out of disease,  
and life out of death.

God was working to bring healing and health and wholeness and life for the people of Nineveh,  
and Jonah was going to be part of the work, in spite of himself.

And God was working to bring health and healing and wholeness and life to Jonah, too,  
maybe even then in spite of what Jonah did.

So, back to the original question – did Jonah think himself blessed to be swallowed up by a great big fish? Did he see that God was providing for him, and taking care of him? Probably not.

Just like we don’t think we are blessed when we get sick or hurt or we find ourselves in bad situations.

But no matter what it looks like on our side, God is still providing for us,

God is still working to bring goodness out of badness,  
and healing out of disease,  
and life out of death.

If the story of Jonah teaches us anything, it pushes us to remember that the help God provides

for us may not always look like help.

Think of Jonah - "Oh, that's great, God! First you almost drown me! Then I get swallowed by a truly huge fish. Wonderful! Just what I always wanted! What's next? Will I get to nearly die of thirst in the desert?" Spoiler alert! There is more to Jonah's story than the ocean and the really big fish...the desert is coming soon.

In a way, being swallowed by the fish was death for Jonah. And in three days, God raised him from death.

It's why this story is a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Because God is always about raising the dead to new life.

Jonah, and Jesus,  
and you and I, too beloved children of God!

We have a God who knows the way out of the grave.\*

Or out of the really big fish, as the case may be.

AMEN

\*G.K. Chesterton "“Christendom has had a series of revolutions and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”"

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