

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Jonah 2:1-10

Sermon Title: "When The Going Gets Tough, The Tough Pray" (In the Belly of a Whale Lenten Series)

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The Newsboys is a Christian rock group that I love to listen to. I love listening to them, mainly because their songs are full of wonderful humor, if you catch it. I get a kick out of what they can come up with. And yet, behind the jokes are strong Christian messages.

The Newsboys just happened to write a song back in 2002 for the VeggieTales' movie *Jonah*, and it was called "In the Belly of the Whale." The song begins with these words (and you can only imagine what Jonah was thinking to himself as we hear these lyrics): "Up to my ears in bitter tears. Can't believe I've sunk this low as I walk the plankton inner sanctum. Got outta Dodge, sailed on a bon-less Bon voyage. You said North, I headed South. Tossed overboard. Good Lord, that's a really large mouth..."¹ Imagine Jonah being lifted up by a large group of burly sailors, being unceremoniously carried to the side of the ship, plummeting over the rail into an angry sea. Imagine that sea calming immediately, and Jonah thinking that his trouble were now over. Imagine Jonah seeing a fin

¹ http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/n/newsboys/belly_of_the_whale.html

break through the surface of the water, far away at first but then drawing closer to him. Imagine Jonah trying to swim back to the ship in a panic, while looking back and seeing the fin getting larger and moving faster. And then imagine Jonah seeing a huge mouth and possibly large teeth, and what seemed to be a living cave surrounding him in seconds, and closing all around him, and then engulfing him in utter darkness.

The Newsboys has Jonah saying this in their song, "I'm sleeping with fishes here, in the belly of the whale. I'm highly nutritious here, in the belly of the whale. Bad food, lousy atmosphere. I don't wanna bellyache. How long is this gonna take?"

The lyrics of their song can make us laugh. It seems highly ridiculous just to think that Jonah could have been eaten by a large fish or a whale. It is funny to think that Jonah fell to such low depths in his ministry, so that God had to send a fish to carry him back the other way, toward Nineveh, which is where Jonah should have been heading by land (not by sea).

However, we discover from Jonah's point of view in Chapter 2, there is nothing funny about his experience. He is deeply distraught about what is happening to him. We know from the story that Jonah

will travel three days and three nights in the fish, but does Jonah know this? Does God ever tell him, or is Jonah left in suspense? For all Jonah knows, he must live in some dark purgatory for an unlimited period of time, maybe until the day he pays for his sin of running away from God.

Jonah is distressed as the whale moves under the water like a long submarine. In fact, Jonah doesn't see his residence as a submarine or the belly of a whale. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried," Jonah says. Sheol is the word for the grave. Sheol is the place of death, the underworld where departed spirits go. Nothing is alive in Sheol – it is like visiting Hades for the rest of your life. Jonah believes himself to be in utter death, far removed from every living thing. Nobody knows where he is – nobody will ever be able to find him. "You cast me into the deep," Jonah says, "into the heart of the seas." He even says, "I have been cast out of Your sight." Can God ever find him? Has Jonah been removed from the presence of God, too?

When we have sunk so low that all we seem to do is fill our eyes with tears and have hopeless thoughts, it feels as though God is far away. It seems as though God is not answering our prayers and rescuing us from our problems. It seems as though nothing anybody says is helping us. They try, but nothing they

say strikes a chord. We might even become angry with them, and abruptly tell them to shut up.

Listen to how Jonah paints the picture of his sorrow. “Water surrounds me, even surrounds my soul. The deep closes around me.” The word for deep is really chaos: utter confusion and total loss of control. “Weeds are wrapped around my head.” Maybe seaweed in the whale’s belly has been crawling all over him. It may feel like living creatures threatening to attack his head and neck, and choke him to death. “I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.” The earth has long, steel bars like prison cells, and Jonah thinks he is trapped in one of those jails, like being trapped in a dark dungeon under the earth, disregarded and forgotten forever.

We might have felt this way before. When bad things happen to us, they can really zap our energy. They steal away our joy. We spin out of control. There is nothing to smile about – there is nothing to get excited about. “How long is going to take?” we wonder. Life stinks. We become totally depressed.

When difficulties come our way, how do we tend to respond? There are many ways of responding to

failures. People may become angry and possibly blame others for their misfortune. They might dwell upon what happened a little too much, dissecting each misstep, and then beating themselves up for making dumb mistakes. They think themselves to be failures. They believe they can never get anything right, so why bother trying? They lose courage, they lose self-esteem, they lose themselves.

Or, people may pray. They may grab tightly to that direct line of communication we have with God – better than the 4G network, better than WiFi – and speak directly with the One who always listens, always responds.

Jonah believes himself to be in the place of death, deep down in a watery grave, and he has the sense to pray. All of Chapter 2 is a pray with God. “I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and God answered me.” From the belly of a whale, from the grave, from behind the thick bars of his prison, God responds. “I said, ‘I have been cast out of your sight,’ yet I will look again toward your holy temple... The earth with its bars closed behind me forever, yet you have brought up my life from the pit (Sheol, the grave), O Lord, my God.”² Whereas Jonah might have lost everything else, he has not lost his ability to speak with God. No

² Jonah 2:2, 4, 6.

matter how bad off he is, he still has the breath to cry out to God.

Complaining and griping accomplishes nothing. We only complain and gripe some more. Becoming more frustrated and more enraged gets us nowhere. Frustration builds up the doubt and anger, and anger makes us do things we would not do if we were thinking clearly. Prayer gets us back on the path we should take.

Prayer is proactive, in that it tackles the situation from the start. Right out of the box, Jonah prays with God and tackles his predicament: "I am afflicted... I am in the belly of Sheol... I have been cast off and into the deep." There is no fooling around when he prays with God. He doesn't dance around the situation. He doesn't see the 800-pound gorilla in the room without saying something about it. Prayer gets Jonah to the heart of the problem quickly. He tackles it, making it real, making it tangible.

Prayer then moves us from tackling the situation to solving it. Prayer cuts through the tall thick weeds. Prayer causes the clouds of confusion to dissolve. Prayer brings light to the situation, so we may travel through it more smoothly.

What put Jonah in the belly of the whale in the

first place? It wasn't as though he was exercising in the sea one day, doing laps from one little island to another, and a big fish just happened to come by and swallow him whole. Jonah shouldn't have been near the water at all. He shouldn't have been heading toward the Mediterranean Sea in the west, the opposite direction of Nineveh in the east.

It was Jonah's fault that he found himself in the belly of a whale. He refused to cast his eyes up to God, responding positively to the call to do ministry in Nineveh. He tried to hide from God. He thought he was free to do his own thing, and his false sense of freedom cost him jail time.

Jonah orchestrated his own failures, his own suffering. Yet he still has the sense to pray. Even when we mess up, we may still pray. We may still tackle the situation with God. With God we may solve the problem.

In Jonah's case, solving the problem was pretty simple: acknowledge God, surrender to God, and let God have his way. At the end of his prayer, Jonah the prophet says, "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice to You with a voice of thanksgiving. I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord."³ God, you were right

³ Jonah 2:8-9.

all along, Jonah is saying. Jonah could not forsake God's mercy upon him. He sacrifices his ideas of freedom – doing what he wanted to do – because there is no freedom in that. Carrying out God's will is true freedom: there we receive purpose and meaning. Jonah recognizes that he has given himself over to God as a prophet and so he has to make good on what he vowed. He must serve where God wants him to serve, because he owes God his life. Jonah will not be a fool anymore. He has prayed to God for his sin, and God brings his salvation. It is not until the problem is solved that the whale spits Jonah onto the shore.

This season of Lent is like being in the belly of a whale. I have never thought of Lent in that manner before, until after reading Jonah 2. Ash Wednesday is like a great big mouth opening up and swallowing us whole. Palm Sunday and Easter is like the big mouth opening once again. The time in between, this Lenten time, is a strange time for us. It is a more somber time. It is a more reflective, serious time. In the belly of this whale God calls us to take more time with him in prayer, in worship, in reading. God calls us to have more intention in being the servants that God calls us to be. God calls us to rely on him, to believe in him without reservation, to trust that God knows what he

is doing with us, and still may guide us in the ways we ought to go.

For 40-plus days we travel together in the belly of this Lenten whale. No matter how we entered this season – maybe we entered with some excitement or maybe we enter with some fear and trembling – however we’ve come to this season, God wants to do something with us. God wants to do something in us. Remove us from the prison cells; take us out of our personal Sheols. God wants to listen to our dreams and plans. God wants to work with us to solve the problems, to satisfy the hunger, to erase the doubts.

And what happens in the end? What happens at the end of Lent? We are regurgitated out on the other side. We are spat out, and are delivered from our sins.⁴ We are no longer covered with the slimy digestive enzymes that slowed us down. By being spat out, we are made clean once more. We mentioned the Newsboys before, and their song “In the Belly of the Whale.” At the end of the song, these are the lyrics: “You can't keep a good man down,... And I've been there, man. But I've been expectorated. I'm elated! I'm free like Willie! Happy Day!”⁵

⁴ James Bruckner, The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, cf. 77.

⁵ http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/n/newsboys/belly_of_the_whale.html.

Like Jonah, we are given another chance to live again. We are given the gift to see another day. We dedicate those days to the Lord for the wonderful Counselor and mighty God that he is.