

Last week we ended the story of Jonah as the sailors tossed Jonah overboard into the raging sea. The sea immediately responded and stopped its raging leading the sailors to pray, and to offer sacrifices and vows to Jonah's God, the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land. As we enter the story this morning Jonah's "Not Me" is loud and clear, as he would rather die than to give God's word the Ninevehites. Yet, God has implemented Plan B! Let us listen for the word of God to us this morning...

Jonah has just been hurled into the sea. Now if we remember the story he asked for this! Jonah is the one who said, "Not me!" to God by his actions and his request of the sailors. Jonah is banking on death, BUT God chooses life. The storyteller writes, "But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah." The Lord said, "Not so fast Jonah, I've given you the gift of life and I am hoping you will claim it!"

Without looking at the details of the whole text just yet, let me point out the actions that enclose out text for this morning: "God acts, God initiates"... God appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah from the deep. God has the great fish spew Jonah out on dry land. The words translated as "swallow" and "spewed" in Hebrew only have negative connotations. We expect that of the latter word! But they are both negative because their action thwarts the death Jonah hoped for. Negative because even the great fish could not stomach Jonah's actions! Jonah's actions said, "Not Me!" BUT, God said, "Yes, you!" God acts to save Jonah's life, the life God gifted to him.

The text then states rather matter-of-factly that Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. In our New Testament text Jesus referred to Jonah's three days and three nights as the only miraculous sign the Pharisees and teachers of law would be given about the Son of Man. They wanted Jesus to perform signs and wonders, but Jesus basically said, "Like Jonah, the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights." As post resurrection people we understand this reference. Jesus is speaking about his death on Friday and his resurrection Sunday morning. Jesus is saying to them, "See, something greater than the miracle of Jonah is in your midst and you don't even realize it." The Son of Man is more, far more than a miraculous sign like Jonah. "No sign will be given," Jesus said, "except Jonah!"

Now Jonah surviving three days and three nights inside the belly of a great fish is certainly miraculous. And this was Jonah's response to the miraculous... He finally... he finally prayed! Jonah finally prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish when he realized he wasn't going to die!

Let's pause to think about this. Jonah said, "No to God." Jonah ran from God's presence. Jonah confessed to the sailors, "For I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." Jonah asks to be tossed overboard. Jonah's finds himself inside the fish, miraculously alive, not dead. Yet, three days and three nights pass, before he finally prays! Yes, **THEN** Jonah prays...

What do you think his first words would be? What would your first words be? When you find yourself wrapped in the muck and mire, the belly of life, on

account of your decisions, what words would spill from your lips as you prayed to God? When it seemed all else failed what would you pray?

Jonah said, “**YOU** cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me, all **YOUR** waves and **YOUR** breakers passed over me... The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains!” “**YOU** cast me into the deep!”

Jonah basically prayed, “**God** you caused this mess I am in! **God**... you are to blame for what’s wrong with my life. **God** you did this to me!” Does this sound familiar to any of your life circumstances? It certainly sounds like the question that reverberates the air waves when tragedy strikes, “Why, **God**?” Why did **YOU** let this happen to me? Why did **YOU** let this happen to us? **God**, **YOU** are to blame!

Now wouldn’t you have expected Jonah to say something like this, “I’m sorry for the mess I caused Lord?” Or “I’m sorry for saying no and running in the opposite direction.” Or simply, “Lord, I messed up!” Yet, Jonah’s prayer is not one of confession. His prayer conveys an utter lack of self-knowledge. Jonah doesn’t see or chooses not to acknowledge the part he played in his current situation. He just cries out and blames God.

When all else fails... blame someone else for your predicament. A student does poorly on a test, yet blames the teacher for not teaching the subject right. An alcoholic loses her job and then her family, yet blames anyone and everyone but herself. A teenager goes out with friends and together they make some bad choices landing them all in the local jail, yet the teenager finds a way to blame his parents for letting him go. A workaholic, who doesn’t know his children, yet blames the company for its demands. A couple whose credit cards are maxed out with no money to make the minimum payments, blame the banks that issued them credit. It so easy to blame others for our problems and Jonah it seems blames God!

Now if that isn’t bold enough, his prayer continues as he boasts of his piety, his faithfulness to the God of heaven. He lifted himself above **THOSE** who worshiped idols saying, “Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty, but I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you!” Now remember why Jonah is where he is... he ran from God!

In Jonah’s prayer he uses the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular 26 times as subject, object, or possessive, and not once is his usage self-effacing. Not once, does Jonah say, “I goofed up God!” Not once, does he say, “I wasn’t loyal, I didn’t follow your command.” Not once does Jonah say, “I’m sorry.” Instead, he blames God for his predicament and is boastful of his faith. Is it any wonder that the fish could not stomach Jonah? So when God spoke to the fish, the great fish gladly spewed him up on dry land!

Now let me share a little bit about the fish! The identity of the fish in Jonah’s story actually stirs debate. The ancient tradition that a whale swallowed Jonah probably derives from the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Old Testament, which uses a Greek word-meaning whale in this text. The original Hebrew, however, does not employ a corresponding word for “whale.” Instead it

only speaks four times of a “fish”, the first time of a “great fish.” I did a bit of research on whales in the Mediterranean and there are two species that are recorded in these waters, the deep diving sperm whales and huge fin whales, the second largest sea animal. It’s just that the text doesn’t confirm this!

Now if that wasn’t enough about the fish, let me throw in the gender confusion. In the first two and the last occurrence the word “fish” is masculine in Hebrew, but in the third occurrence it is feminine. Of course, scholars have various explanations for this oddity from scribal error to mythical medieval explanations of Jonah moving from a male to a female fish and then back again.

But, I’d like to share with you one possibility that speaks of Jonah’s salvation from certain death to life. The feminine form of fish follows a Hebrew word that connotes an internal organ and some scholars suggest that the phrase “from the inside of the fish” could be understood as “from the womb of the fish.” When Jonah finally prayed, it was as if he was praying from the womb of the fish, praying from the life giving space God provided to save him from certain death.

Through the great fish, whale or not, God gives Jonah another chance at life, another chance for transformation from death to life, from disobedience to obedience. But, let’s not get ahead of our selves in the story, as Jonah’s second chance at obedience will be our topic next week!

Let’s talk about ourselves in relation to Jonah this week; about you and me when we are in the depths of despair blaming anybody and everybody for our predicament. Maybe you are there because you’ve run from God and gotten yourself in a mess. Maybe you are there because life is just too overwhelming. Maybe you are there because you don’t know where else to be, you just know you want to blame someone else for all your troubles.

What might we learn from our text this morning? For starters, I believe we learn that God’s gift of life-giving space is not dependent on us. God sent the great fish to save Jonah long before he prayed. And God’s saving action didn’t cease when Jonah’s prayers were a little less than honest. God’s gift of life-giving space, that place where new life can begin again in us, is just that a gift. God stands ready to transform us, to renew us, to move us from death to life again and again.

We also learn that like Jonah, it is hard to admit our culpability in life’s messes. It’s hard to say, “This is of my own doing, I got myself into this mess.” It’s hard to confess to another the part you played in a current ugly situation. It’s even harder to lay ourselves bare before God, honestly confessing our mess ups.

When I reflect on this particular chapter of Jonah, I give thanks for its inclusion in scripture because it demonstrates so clearly to me that God simply loves us and calls forth life. We can run. We can hide. We can say to God, “Not me.” We can inflate our piety. We can say we are better than THOSE people. We can even blame God for our predicament. And this text tells us that God doesn’t give up on us! This is in and of itself a miracle.

God didn’t give up on Jonah. God will not give up on me, or you, or us! God loves us just as we are, even as God calls us to life that is really life. God’s

life giving space, the womb of life signified by the great fish in our story, is available to all of us this day.

Yes and THEN Jonah prayed... What about us? When is our THEN? What is the context of our prayers when all else fails? I wonder if we have the humility to be honest with God. As Kathleen Norris suggests, "Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine." When all else fails, how might we ask God to change us in ways we can't imagine? When all else fails, how might we admit that we are the ones that need to be changed, not someone else or something else.

God simply asked Jonah to love his neighbor, even though the Ninevehites were despicable neighbors. Jonah though had an excuse, as he believed those neighbors were not worth saving. They were too far gone and didn't deserve God's grace.

I wonder if our "THEN" prayers are more like Jonah's than we care to admit. Do we inflate our own piety, while suggesting we are better than others? Do we do everything in our power to blame someone else or something else or even God, rather than admit that transformation begins within each one of us?

As I pray about our future together as a church, I believe this particular chapter of Jonah has a central message for us. It's not everybody out there that needs to change, so that they will come to see that we are an inclusive community of faith, hope and love. It's not them; it is us that need transformation.

When all else fails, let us be willing to pray, "Change us, transform us, God, in ways we can't imagine!"

God has spewed us up on dry land, my friends, right here in the heart of the City of Redlands. I wonder... I wonder if we will humble ourselves and heed God's call to love our neighbors, even those we find despicable. I pray so! I pray so! Amen.