

**Lent 2010: Jonah**  
**Sermon 3 – Praying From The Belly of the Great Big Fish**  
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**Based on Jonah 2 and Matthew 7:1-11**

Since we've been focusing on Jonah during Lent, a number of you have asked if I thought it was actually possible for a man to be swallowed up by a great big fish and survive. My normal response to such questions is that Scripture tells us that all things are possible with God. I usually take the stance that if Scripture said it happened, I have no reason to question it unless evidence proves otherwise.

You might be surprised to know, however, that in 1891 a man actually did survive being swallowed by a sperm whale (which is the only whale with a mouth big enough to swallow an adult human). His name was James Bartley. He was embarking on a whaling voyage near the Falkland Islands off of the coast of South America.

One of the crew members was lucky enough to harpoon a whale. Unfortunately, the whale submerged and then resurfaced underneath their sailing vessel, tilting the ship to one side. Many on board were thrown into the sea.

The whale was finally captured, and then butchered on the deck of the ship. Much to everyone's surprise, the whale's stomach was moving. When the stomach was sliced open, there was James Bartley. The digestive juices had burned off all of his body hair and bleached his skin white. Amazingly, James survived the ordeal. He never stepped foot on a boat again. On his tombstone are the words, "A Modern Jonah." Believe it or not.

So here's what we know so far about Jonah. In chapter 1, Jonah is asked by God to go to Nineveh – the capital city of the wicked Assyrian empire – and tell its inhabitants to repent. Jonah wants no part of telling his nation's greatest enemy about God's mercy and forgiveness, and so he decides to run away. Jonah boards a ship headed for the beautiful paradise of Tarshish.

On the way, the ship is struck by a fierce storm – one so terrible that the sailors wonder why the gods are angry at them. So they cast lots to determine who on board is the guilty party. The lots point to Jonah, which Jonah saw coming. Jonah knows that the storm is God's way of reminding him of his duty to go to Nineveh. So Jonah requests that the crew throw him overboard. And Jonah drowns. The end.

OK, I made that last part up. God has entrusted to Jonah an important mission. God is not just going to let Jonah drown, no matter how stubborn and rebellious he has been.

The Scriptures say, "The Lord arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights."

“The Lord arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah.” I wonder... as Jonah was inside the stomach of that great big fish, was he grateful to be alive, or was he sorry that God ever arranged such a thing? The smells and sensations of a big fish’s stomach would not be my forte. Even though God was gracious in saving Jonah from the great storm, you have to wonder... was Jonah grateful, or did he shake his fist at God, grumbling, “I wish you would have just let me drown!”

But Jonah should have seen it coming. After all, as we discovered last week, our God is a providing God. Through this most unexpected act, God provides for Jonah and offers him a second chance at life – a second chance to claim the mission God has given to him. As gross as it sounds, the three days God offers Jonah in the belly of the great big fish blesses Jonah with some time for reflection and ultimately a chance to repent for not doing what God had asked of him.

At what moment did Jonah finally come to the realization that God was watching over him and protecting him by sending the great fish in the storm? We don’t know. What we do know is that while Jonah was in the belly of that great big fish, Jonah did not feel alone. Jonah felt the Lord’s presence with him.

How do we know that? Because in the second chapter of Jonah – the part of the story where Jonah is in the belly of the great big fish – we find Jonah praying. He is having a conversation with the Lord. The words that Jonah uses in his chat with God are not his own. Jonah speaks to God using one the ancient prayers from his prayer book, known to us as the book of Psalms. Psalm 42, to be exact.

During this uncertain moment in Jonah’s life when he didn’t know what would happen – whether he would live or die – Jonah falls back on an ancient Scriptural prayer, mostly likely taught to him by his parents as a child.

“I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me... you snatched me from the jaws of death as my life was slipping away... My salvation comes from the Lord alone.”

Notice: even though Jonah knows that he has disobeyed, Jonah continues to trust in the faithfulness of God. Despite Jonah’s sinful ways, Jonah entrusts his life into the merciful arms of God. And in doing that, a sense of peace comes over Jonah – so much so, that Jonah finds himself able to worship the Lord with songs of praise and prayers of thanksgiving.

Just as confession brought peace into Jonah’s life, it can do the same for us. Confession not only allows us to come clean with God, but it helps us recognize that by ourselves, we will never be good enough to earn God’s love. Our sinful nature will choose its own way, again and again and again. As the Scriptures say, “We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.”

By ourselves, we will never be found worthy to receive a heavenly crown of glory. We are sinners. We deserve punishment and death for disobeying God’s commands. On our own, there is no hope. Just as God sent the great big fish to save Jonah, we, too, need God to send someone to save us. And God has done just that. Only this time, God sends his very own Son, Jesus Christ.

Just as the great big fish swallowed up Jonah thereby saving him, on the cross Jesus will save us by swallowing up the powers of sin and death. Such an incredible act of mercy and love offers us the gift of peace, and hopefully – just like Jonah did – we will find ourselves wanting to worship God with songs of praise and prayers of thanksgiving.

What is your response to the peace and joy God has given you by offering his Son upon the cross? Have we been to the cross so many times that its meaning and power has lost its significance? Are we truly grateful for the sacrifice Jesus has made for us upon the cross in order that we could enjoy God's glory and blessings for all of eternity?

Take away the cross, and we have nothing. It's that important. Without the cross, all of the promises God makes to us in the Bible would have to be clarified. Each promise would have a footnote, with lots of small print exceptions. Without the cross, our relationship with God would be based on an if-then arrangement. "If you do this, then I will love you," God would say. "Only if you live this way will you be saved."

The story of Jonah reminds us that we will never live up to that kind of arrangement. Just like Jonah, we have a habit of doing the exact opposite of what God asks of us, or we pretend like we never heard what God asked us to do. Either way, if salvation is based on an if-then covenant, we are doomed.

The cross of Jesus changes all of that. The cross changes the if-then arrangement into a because-therefore agreement. God says to us, "Because you are my beloved child, therefore I will watch over you and protect you. Because you belong to me, I will make a way for us to be together for all of eternity."

Because Jonah was God's beloved child, even though he disobeyed God, God still provided for him. God still saved him from the storms of life. That is the good news of God's saving grace. Because God has overcome the powers of sin and death that separate us from God through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have peace with God. God saves us in order that we might be beacons of light in this world, shining the way for others to come to know the forgiveness and salvation available through Christ, our Lord.

Yes, even when we don't deserve it, our Lord comes to us with his gracious, saving power. He comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who chooses to accept our sin upon the cross and die in our place. Jesus comes so that we would not feel alone during the uncertain times of our lives.

Some of the great paintings of *Jonah in the Whale* have two people inside the belly of the great big fish. Yes, Jonah is there, but another person sits close to him, his hand upon Jonah's shoulder. That other man is unmistakably Jesus, who has joined Jonah in his sinfulness, to offer him the gifts of forgiveness and freedom.

Thanks be to God, Jesus joins us, too, in our sinfulness. Jesus comes and places his hand upon our shoulder and tells us to look at the cross and to remember the sacrifice he made for us. Christ joins us in our uncertainties and fears and reminds us that we are not alone. Christ comes to remind us how nothing can ever separate us from the love of our heavenly Father. Christ comes to us and says, "All will be well."

So have no fear. Even when the belly of this great big world seems to swallow you up, have no fear. Christ is with you. He has come to set you free. Through his death and resurrection, Christ will free you from the darkness of this world, and lead you to the glorious light of your heavenly Father.

Like Jonah, may we entrust our lives to the promises of God's Word: "I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me... he snatched me from the jaws of death as my life was slipping away... My salvation comes from the Lord alone."

Amen.