

Jonah 2

December 29, 2019

The New Year is upon us and with it comes a new era for our church, with a new church name. Over the next few weeks we will take time to review the core disciplines of our lives together as Christians, and as members of this church. Disciplines such as prayer, the study of God's word and fellowship. These disciplines are essential for our flourishing both individually and corporately as a family of servants toiling together for His kingdom here in this church.

This morning the emphasis will be on Prayer, the most basic, yet essential of these disciplines. We will come at it from an angle you may have never thought of, from a story both familiar and yet foreign. But in the end, it should spur us on to do what we've all been called to do. Namely to:

Proposition:

Pray like your life depends upon it, because it does!

Turn with me to the Old Testament book of Jonah and follow along as I review this story starting at the very first verse of chapter 1.

¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has

come up before me.” ³But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Now what was old Jonah up to? God came to him with a word, gave him clear direction and a job to do, but rather than respond to God or even acknowledge Him, Jonah turned and fled. And he did so without saying a word, without even saying “Hi”. If ever there was a time to pray, to talk to God, this would be it. The Almighty was standing there talking directly to him in the comfort of your own surroundings, in his own friend zone, and yet not a peep from the prophet. What gives Jonah? What are you doing? Instead of talking to the Lord and doing what he says, you went and jumped on a boat and payed for a cruise headed in the exact opposite direction of where God told you to go. You ran and hid. But don’t you know that hiding from the Almighty is not such a good idea?

⁴For the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up ⁵Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it

for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and lay down and was fast asleep. “So the Captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper?” Arise, call out to your god? Perhaps your god will give a thought to us, that we might not perish.”

But once again not a peep from Jonah. While his ship was tossed and turned at sea, he just sat there groggily wiping the crust from his eyes and did nothing. If ever there was a time to pray, this would be it. A storm is threatening your life. But nothing came from the lips of the prophet!

⁷And the sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from?” ⁹So he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” for the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.

Wouldn't prayer sound like the right thing to do now, Jonah? Wouldn't this be a good time to ask God for some help and some guidance? You had a captive audience after all.

But rather than pray:

¹²He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." (and skipping down to verse 15)

¹⁵So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

Even at this point Jonah, the man of God did not pray! Even as he sank into the depths of the sea, he refused to cry out to his God!

But that did not deter the Lord. God was about to get his man exactly where he wanted him. It would still be a few more days but the Lord was about to hear what he had been longing to hear all along, a heartfelt prayer from the lips of Jonah!

Jonah 1:17-2:10

¹⁷And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three

days and three nights. ¹Then Jonah prayed to the
LORD his God from the belly of the fish ²saying,

"I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,
And he answered me;
Out of the belly of Sheol I cried.
And you heard my voice.

³For you cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the flood surrounded me;
All your waves and your billows passed over me.
⁴Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight;
Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'

⁵The waters closed in over me to take my life;
The deep surrounded me;
Weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶At the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
Yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.

⁷When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
And my prayer came to you
Into your holy temple.

⁸Those who pay regard to vain idols
Forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹But I with the voice of thanksgiving
Will sacrifice to you;
What I have vowed I will pay.

Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited
Jonah out upon the dry land.

You see, Jonah finally prayed like his life depended upon it. And evidently, God heard his prayer. God saved him from his stubbornness and turned his life around.

So what can we learn from Jonah and his prayer?
What lessons can we takeaway and apply from his misadventure?

First:

Respond to Him

"Respond to Him?" you might ask. Isn't prayer an attempt to get God to respond to us? Isn't that why we pray? To get his attention and request things from Him? To say, "Looky here God! I could use some

help, right now. Please take some time out of your busy universe runningness

- To throw me a bone.
- To toss me some scraps from your table
- To show me some love.

Isn't God the one who's supposed to be responding to us when we pray.

You might think that. And you might interpret the first verse of Jonah's prayer to mean that.

I called out to the LORD, Jonah said...and he answered me!

Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice!

Isn't that God responding to Jonah?

But look again. What actually prompted Jonah to pray in the first place?

It was the LORD who first came and spoke to him back in chapter 1 verse 1.

It was the LORD who hurled a great wind upon the sea in 1:4 to let it be known to Jonah that he was still there.

And it was the LORD who appointed a big fish to swallow Jonah upon his sinking into the sea (1:17).

The LORD was the one

- Who called Jonah,
- Who pursued Jonah
- and who ultimately rescued him from death.

It was the Lord who in effect, initiated the conversation...and then waited...and waited...and waited for Jonah to respond. He even provided living arrangements in the belly of a big fish, three days and three nights worth, all the while patiently waiting for his man to come to his senses and start talking to Him...to start praying.

And so it is with us.

God calls us,

He pursues us,

He rescues us circumstance by circumstance.

He even designs our situations... both good and bad
...to get us to the place where we finally

- see our need for Him
- and start crying out to Him
- and start talking with Him

In other words, he gets us to the place where we start responding to Him in prayer!

But this brings us to another lesson we can learn from Jonah's prayer, namely to

Be Real with Him

Even though Jonah proclaimed in verse 3 that it was **You Lord who cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas**, Jonah didn't seem to have a problem with that fact. Notice the tone of his prayer. There is not a hint of anger. There is not a "How dare you do such a thing!" charge to any of his words.

Rather he just tells it like it is, in very humble tones. It's almost as if he knows he deserves what he is going through and that God has every right to treat him this way.

Listen to verse 3, where he recalls the moments after he was tossed overboard three days prior. He describes that struggle as follows:

The flood surrounded me, all your waves and your billows passed over me.

This poetically captures what Jonah was feeling as he fought for his life in that moment.

And after he slips below the surface of the water and everything around him fades to black, you would expect his prayer to grow darker and more hopeless, but it doesn't. Notice what he calmly says in verse 4:

'I am driven away from your sight,
Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'

At the moment when all hope should be lost, it isn't. He has been driven from God's sight, but somehow, he proclaims with confidence that he will again look upon God's holy dwelling place. Where did he get such hope; where did he discover such confidence? Apparently, Jonah knew his God well. He had faith. And simply by praying, by talking to God and being real with Him, his hope was restored. He might have been in the dark at that moment, but he knew God would let him look again upon his holy temple.

And the next two verses repeat a similar refrain. They too rehearse the reality of his desperate situation yet follow it up with another declaration of hope!

⁵The waters closed in over me to take my life;
The deep surrounded me;
Weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶At the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
Yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.

These verses speak of Jonah's impending death. As he sinks to the bottom of the sea his situation grows

worse. Not only is there water, water, everywhere, he is suffocating, and his head has become entangled in a mesh of weeds. He is entrapped in what should be an inescapable tomb at the bottom of the ocean.

But God has other plans. He has him right where he wants him. In his moment of deepest despair, a fish perfectly prepared to rescue Jonah swoops down to swallow the prophet and lift up his life from the pit! In one fell swoop, Jonah is saved!

Sure, he had to endure three more days and nights of solitary confinement inside a big smelly fish belly, but the worst had passed. Now, he was ready to:

Remember Him

⁷When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
And my prayer came to you
Into your holy temple.

It took a while, but Jonah's travails and God's rescue of him in the midst of those travails got him thinking about the Lord again. He was no longer ignoring God, fleeing from God and avoiding Him at every turn. Now he was remembering the Lord. He was thinking about Him as a real person, not just as a

- purveyor of good deeds,

- a giver of gifts
- and a treasure trove of promises

as good as all those things are.

Rather,

- he was remembering the Lord's character,
- he was recounting his attributes,
- his was reveling in his innate goodness.

In short, he was worshiping the Lord, again.

You see, prayer is much, much more than giving God a 'honey-do' list. Yes, we can request specific blessings from God. That is good. In fact, all manner of requests are encouraged (recall the many requests of the Lord's prayer). But making requests of God is not all that prayer is. Prayer is also a means

- of communing with God
- of giving thanks to God
- and of worshiping him for who He is.

In fact, the more we mature in the Lord the more we do this. The more we love him as a person and desire to commune with him, the more we just want to talk with him and enjoy his company.

Let me clarify what I mean. Consider how little ones often interact with their parents. Usually they only approach them when they need stuff and ask for it,

beg for it or yell for it. As they interact, they rarely share any personal interest in the 'well-being' of their parental units. They just come to get what they want and leave as soon as they get it, often times without even a word of thanks. But as they mature, children approach their parents differently. Rather than just look to them as personal supply warehouses, they tend to show more interest in their well-being. They are more inclined to spend 'quality time' with their loved ones and to get to know them and love them better. Sometimes they do this without even asking for anything.

So it is with prayer. The more you grow in the LORD the more you love him for who is, and not just for what he brings to the table.

And Jonah's prayer seems to fall more in the "I love you for who you are" category. In fact, if you analyze it, you will not find a single request in the prayer of Jonah.

- Not once does Jonah ask directly for relief from his distress.
- Not once does he ask to be removed from the belly of the fish.
- Not once does he make an explicit request of any kind.

Rather,

- he remembers the Lord,
- he rejoices in the Lord
- and vows to serve the Lord.

And according to verse 7, he seems rather happy that his prayer just made it all the way to his holy temple.

But then comes verse 8 and yet another lesson to learn from Jonah's prayer.

Repent of your sin

Verse 8 is generally considered the most important statement of the book of Jonah. It simply reads

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

The lesson is simple enough. Worship of idols and worship of the Lord are incompatible. If one pays regard to or follows hard after 'vain idols' they cannot simultaneously place their hope in God's steadfast love. Or as Jesus would say,

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

Luke 16:13

Those who have received God's steadfast love forsake that love when they look to anything else as a substitute for it. When they do look elsewhere, they are, as Jonah puts it, "regarding vain idols" or more literally they are "keepers of empty vapors." They are chasing after stuff that vanishes rapidly. They are essentially giving their lives to nothingness.

The curious thing about verse 8 is the way Jonah states it. He doesn't say that he himself is guilty of such sin. Instead he generalizes it in the third person. Those (other people) who regard vain idols forsake their steadfast love. In other words, he doesn't explicitly confess any sin, himself. Yet clearly, he has forsaken the one who poured out his steadfast love for him through his own blatant disobedience.

You see, Jonah did regard at least one particular vain idol while fleeing from the presence of the Lord. Jonah's big idol was himself. He was fleeing from God because God wasn't operating according to Jonah's own agenda. God wasn't doing what Jonah wanted him to do. And Jonah did not like it. Instead, he tried to pick up his toys and go home.

But in the end God's steadfast love won him back and changed his heart. Even though he didn't explicitly confess so in his prayer, Jonah's attitude of thanksgiving at the end of his prayer and his

subsequent acts of obedience in going on to Nineveh where God had called him to go, indicate that he did indeed repent of his sin. For repentance is evidenced more by a change in behavior than a statement of contrition.

Even so, prayer is a good opportunity to approach God with a contrite heart and to ask for him to “forgive us our trespasses” just as Christ instructed us to do.

And finally:

Rejoice in His Salvation

The final verse of Jonah’s prayer is a remarkable turn of events.

**I with a voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
What I have vowed I will pay.**

And this from a man who was still cooped up inside a big fish. Remember Jonah hadn’t been delivered from his smelly abode just yet. He was still in the cramped confines of a fish submerged below the water, and he’d been stuck there for three days and three nights. Yet there he was able to rejoice and be thankful for all God had done for him.

This is a testament to how prayer can change your heart and your attitude. What began as a desperate cry to God, followed by several verses of freighted recollections of a near death experience, had morphed into a jubilant song of thanksgiving. Yet nothing had circumstantially changed. Jonah was not yet fully delivered.

But he knew where that deliverance would come from. With the final words of his prayer he proclaimed:

"Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

It only comes from the Lord.

It comes from no one else.

Jonah know knew this very well.

After foolishly fleeing from the presence of the Lord, Jonah literally learned this lesson the hard way. Only God could have saved him from death in the sea. Only God could have prepared a big fish to swallow him and keep him alive for three days and three nights.

Yes, salvation belongs to the Lord. It can be accomplished by no one else and prayer is the vehicle through which it is accomplished. Everyone whom the Lord saves must ask for it. Everyone whom the Lord saves must pray for it.

This is why we must pray as if our life really depends upon it because it does!

And what's more, the Hebrew word for salvation just so happens to be 'yeshua' the name of the one who would eventually come to save his people from their sin. So when Jonah ended his prayer with **Salvation belongs to the Lord**. He was, unbeknownst to him, calling upon the name of Yashua... of Jesus.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Acts 4:12

This is that same Jesus who unlike Jonah obeyed his call from God thoroughly and completely.

This is that same Jesus who unlike Jonah died a death he did not deserve to die in order to save sinners like you and me.

Although Jesus, like Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the earth... he did not stay there.

He was raised and now lives at the right hand of God interceding for everyone who calls upon his name.

For one much greater than Jonah is here

One who enables us to pray to the LORD our God as if our lives really depend upon it, because they really do!

PRAY