

Prophetic Living - Nowhere Else To Turn

**Jonah 1:4-6; 2:1-10
Acts 27:13-26**

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Read: Jonah 1:4-6; 2:1-10
Acts 27:13-26

This book of Jonah, which we've been studying the last few weeks during our evening services at Calvin - it is our book.

We join together with generations of worshippers in declaring:
We are Jonah!

The book is about us. Jonah is not a prophetic hero who escapes a close call and single-handedly transforms an evil empire. He's a fallible believer, an incomplete human being, a "yes-but" kind of player in the Kingdom of God....

....just like every one of us.
We are Jonah.

God works on Jonah. With patience. With resolve. He keeps working. Carving away at his character, right to the very last verse of the narrative.

Just like he keeps working on us. With patience. With resolve. He keeps working on us. Carving away at our character, right to our very last breathe.

We are Jonah.

Over the four chapters of this short bible book we see Jonah the Prophet as:

Prodigal;
Praying;
Preaching; and
Perturbed.

We are Jonah.

Last time we looked at Jonah the Prodigal who began to pray.

We saw how Jonah gets way off track.

And then, way off track, he is caught!

His fate is sealed, but for the grace of God.

Grace with a huge sense of humour. The Lord stops the descent but then boxes Jonah into a tight, tight corner where he is left to do some very serious thinking. And in that tight corner his life turns around. In the womb-like depth of the fish, Jonah essentially dies and is reborn.

We focussed on tight places, turmoil and challenges as they enter our lives. And, as part of that, we touched briefly on prayer.

I want to go back to that topic - specifically the prayers that come in the storms.

Storm Prayers:

The Lord hurls a great wind onto the sea, and all that energy transforms a quiet marine highway into a churning hydro-monster of death.

The terrified mariners pray.

Shotgun prayers they are - each to their own god, hoping that somewhere out there in the heavens some force will be on duty and interested enough to listen. They pray for mercy.

And Jonah sleeps.

Can you believe it? They're all praying to dead-ends, impotent idols.

And Jonah - knowing that he serves the living God, the Lord who communicates directly with him (he's experienced it) - Jonah snores away. Fast asleep, says v.5. Sound asleep. Gone spiritually AWOL. The captain gives him a verbal thrashing. But notice verse 6 - Jonah **still** doesn't pray. Towards the end of the chapter he suggests a human fix, something he can **do** to redeem the situation. The mariners are, by then, praying to the Lord. Jonah never does. Not until he is inside the fish.

The storm comes and strips everything away, revealing Jonah as prayerless. He's the prophet who doesn't pray.

Eugene Peterson, in his wonderful book on soul life in ministry *Under The Unpredictable Plant*, compares Jonah's prayer void to the soul of the Apostle Paul, one of the first Christian prophets, proclaiming the will of the Lord to Jew and Gentile alike, on his way to meet Caesar. Paul's soul is also exposed in a storm situation - our second reading. Paul is revealed as a person of prayer. While the crew is sleepless all night, throwing everything overboard and despairing, Paul is praying somewhere in the dark of the storm, the night and the ship. And later, rather than coming up with some great heroic human plan, in full view of the crew, Paul breaks bread in v.35.

Hah - there you have the "breaking of bread and prayer". Peterson asks, "Doesn't that have a eucharistic sound to it?" Great and total dependance on the Lord. Communicated dependance. Prayer-filled dependance.

Everything else has been stripped away, and this was left.

And what is Paul's prayer-inspired message in the middle of the storm?

"Do not fear. Keep up the courage."

Tucked between these Old and New Testament storm stories, between these two bookends, are two other storm accounts - these from the life of Jesus. You can read them in Mark 4 and Mark 6. In the first Jesus stills the storm. And in the second he comes to the disciples and says, "Don't be afraid."

Peterson comments, "Jesus, training his disciples, uses these sea storms in which they were out of control to embrace a life of prayer in which they might participate in God's control." [*Unpredictable Plant* p.71]

The out of control times - do any of us like them? Be they career concerns, a health diagnosis, our reputation out in the community, the behaviour of our spouse or children, the economy... it could be any one of a million things that impact our lives and there doesn't seem to be a plug thing we can do about it!

I don't know about you, but those times drive me crazy. Perhaps that's part of being male, and even worse than that, first-born male. Take charge. Fix things. Come up with a solution. When I can't.... drives me nuts.

But, yes, those times are there.

Moments beyond managing.

Descending, sometimes, with a wild Katrina-like fury into our lives.

Then what?

When everything else is stripped away,
then what?

What will be revealed about our inner selves, about our soul?

Will it be prayer-filled?

Or will there be a prayer-void?

The Word of God calls us into a practice of prayer so that,
in the midst of our unmanageable moments,
we can participate in God's control.

He never leaves us.

He never forgets us.

His promises never quit.

His power never weakens.

He is never second best, second strongest, second wisest.

Interestingly, in both Jonah and Paul's case, the ships they were in were stripped of their cargo. **Everything** was tossed over and away.

Nothing was left.

Only God.

Our lives may seem full - full of health, full of work opportunities, full of good neighbors and friends, full of family, full of money and toys.

You know as well as I do that it really doesn't take much to strip all of that away.
And then what?
What are you left with?

Prayer.

Let me conclude with a quick reminder of the school of prayer.
No - this is not some new program dreamed up for us here at Calvin.
This is a very ancient prayer school.

It is the prayer school that Jonah displays in chapter two.
When finally he remembers where true beginnings of life are to be found,
when he finally remembers to pray,
the prayer that we see is actually very deep.
It is a prayer that shows schooling, shows training.

It is the school of prayer found in the Psalms.
This prayer of Jonah is completely unoriginal. Every phrase of it can be found in the Psalms. I challenge you to take a concordance and your bible and then work your way through the prayer. You'll see what I mean.

Jonah didn't just pray off the cuff.
He prayed what he had learned. He prayed the Scriptures.
Athanasius wrote that "*Most of scripture speaks to us, but the Psalms speak for us*" Indeed, it is so.
Jonah had memorized the Psalms. He obviously had prayed the Psalms. They were embedded deep in his soul. They shaped the form and language of his communication with God.

From time to time I run into people who believe that the best prayers are those that come off the cuff. I disagree. What *is true* is that the best prayers are those that come from deep in the soul, true prayer, honest prayer. But just off the cuff, spontaneous, no preparation, no training, no shaping, no form?

Think of how we speak and write - there is training. And the more we are trained, the more we learn our grammar and literary forms and structure and content, the deeper and richer our everyday conversation will be, too.

Life is plenty complicated. And varied.

To connect with God in all that, wouldn't some structure, some form, some training in content be good?

We do that anyway - how many of you have heard the acronym ACTS?

That gives a shape and framework on which to build prayers to the Lord that is deeper than just rhyming off a quick shopping list.

The Psalms are a whole school of experience in such framework - getting beyond *what I'm just feeling and Lord, what I just need right now*.

Mature prayer is dominated by a sense of God. It rescues us from a preoccupation with ourselves and pulls us into adoration of and pilgrimage to God. The prayer school of the Psalms deepens that kind of maturity in our praying. [Peterson, p.103]

Take work? Yup. But the reading and praying of the Psalms gives structure and voice to some of the deepest places of the soul.

Prayer - structured prayer, Psalm-Prayerbook prayer, disciplined prayer.

Prayer is one of the fundamental, non-negotiable disciplines of healthy Christian living. The Biblical prayerbook of the Psalms is one of the best ways to enhance that discipline in your daily life.

Please allow me to repeat the challenge issued here two weeks ago:

If you don't already, may I encourage you to begin reading one Psalm a day. As you read it, take the time to turn it into your own prayer of the day.

Do this, and you'll be through the Psalms twice a year.

Do that for a couple of years and you will notice a change, a deepening maturity and richness, in the way you pray. I guarantee it or your money back.

At the end, of course, schooled or not, you still have to make a decision -

get the diploma and then forget what you've learned - Jonah.
or make that learning a key part of who you are - Paul.

What will the next life storm reveal about you?