

Prophetic Living - Caught!

Jonah 2:1-10

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Three elders were gathered at a local coffee shop following a Church Council meeting. They got to talking about prayer in general and the appropriate and effective positions for prayer. As they were talking, a telephone repairman was sipping his double-double at a nearby table. One elder shared that he felt the key was in the hands. He always held his hands together and pointed them upward as a form of symbolic worship. The second suggested that real prayer was conducted on your knees. The third suggested that they both had it wrong--the only position worth its salt was to pray while stretched out flat on your face.

By this time the phone man couldn't stay out of the conversation any longer. He interjected, "I found that the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended forty feet above the ground."

Jonah might have his own peculiar take on postures in prayer.

Last week we began to troll our way through the prophetic book of *Jonah*. We echoed the liturgical call from the Synagogue season of Yom Kippur. As the prophecy of *Jonah* is read, the congregation responds:

We are Jonah.

Yes - *we are Jonah!*

The book is about us. This son of Amittai 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.

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

Prodigal;
Praying;
Preaching; and
Perturbed.

Last week - Jonah the Prodigal Prophet.

This week -

Well, he's not quite dangling from a power pole, 40 feet above the ground.
But he *is* in quite a jam! Jonah - praying.

Read with me from the Word Of God -

Jonah 2:1-10, p.860 (Old Testament)

Jonah was running -

- running away from the presence of the Lord.
- running towards the lure of Tarshish, a city full of excitement, commerce and culture; where he wanted to go.
- running away from the grind of Ninevah, a city of risk, uncertainty, possible loss, and resentment; where God wanted him to go.

Jonah is running.

Distracted and sidetracked just like we can so easily be distracted -

- distracted as individuals
- distracted as a congregation.

It is easy to lose sight of our identity and task in this city.

Forgetting in a rights-oriented, me-first culture that our lives are,

first of all
all about God.

And forgetting that our lives are,
first of all
about advancing the reputation and influence of His Kingdom.

Forgetting, amid the noise of email, satellite TV and cell phones
that we're to live with hearts, ears and souls tuned to hearing Him speak.
looking for where He is at work and how we are to be involved.

Career advancement gets in the way.

Busy recreational and sports team schedules get in the way.

Looking out of the corner of our eye to try and catch how others respond to us, hoping perhaps for some
recognition and maybe even a bit of applause, gets in the way.

Wanting to feel good gets in the way.

Temptations to engage in sinful actions gets in the way.

We **know** better.

Ah yes - many of you here tonight are mature Christians.

You've heard more sermons than you can count.

Can recite the books of the bible.

Understand Christ's summary of the Law.

Can perhaps even articulate a good statement of Kuyperian Kingdom theology, who knows - maybe
even with a Doyweerdian spin.

In our heart we **know** which side is up.

But sometimes there is a disconnect between knowing what God wants and doing it. Very easy to say, "yes,
but..." and rationalize something else.

At which point we are asserting our own independence, staking sovereign claim over our own lives -
acting to some degree on the invitation of the slithering serpent in Eden who offers us the opportunity to be
like God, to become a little independent god or goddess.

As John Calvin points out, it happens oh, so easily. Human hearts are relentless factories of idolatry.

Eugene Peterson comments, "There are a thousand ways of being religious without submitting to
Christ's lordship, and people are practised in most of them." [*Under The Unpredictable Plant*, p.84]

That is **oh so easy** for congregations, too.

It is easy for congregations to be busy, busy, busy religious institutions.

And these busy religious institutions can be engaged in all kinds of very reasonable, helpful,
productive, and sometimes demanding projects.

These busy religious institutions can have wonderful facilities, perhaps even with cornerstones
sporting the slogan *solī deo gloria, to the glory of God alone*.

But are they doing what God wants them to be doing?

Not every church needs to run every program. No church is called to be all things to all people.

What does God want your church to be?

Do they even take time to try and discern that?

And, if they do, how high up the priority list will it go?

It's easy to be too busy to do that.

It's easy to suggest that since others do it such and such a way, and get very good success doing it, we
should, too.

It's easy to simply maintain what God called our forebearers to do and not ever stop to wonder if the fiery
cloud of Christ's Spirit might be leading today's people of God in a new chapter of their pilgrimage to
Canaan.

So at Calvin we have believed this -

*that as members of a community that seeks to glorify God, we commit to sharing the life-changing
message of Christ with our neighbours and each other.*

We focus on *bowing down, reaching up, reaching out and reaching in* as four strategic pillars of living out the communal call to glorify God by sharing the life-changing message of Christ internally and externally.

How hard would it be to become distracted from that task?
To wander off into taking up other projects or studies or controversies?

We are Jonah.

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. I'm not sure how much time he had for that thinking before he fell unconscious. Probably not that long. But long enough to get it. Long enough to repent. And he does.

Down in the fish, here is the heart and core of Jonah's life - caught in the very tight place; left with nothing else except prayer.

Jonah prays.

Saved from the water, it is a prayer of relief.

You need to understand the Jewish attitude towards water. For them it was the place of chaos. It was the place of evil. It was the place of death.

Jonah has been saved from that.

Caught in that tight space, Jonah's life is rebooted.

His spiritual compass is reset.

His moral priorities are reorganized.

His own desires and wants aren't quite so important, anymore.

As verse 7 says it:

*As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple....*

Jonah gets it again, and self is removed from the place of idolatry.

He surrenders anew to the Lord.

We are Jonah.

Ah - why is it that sometimes we have to be pushed right to the very edge of losing absolutely everything before we finally wake up to realize how off-track we've wandered?

Perhaps our health is allowed to collapse.

Perhaps we lose our job.

Perhaps our marriage experiences turmoil.

Perhaps the congregation shrinks to the point of oblivion.

Perhaps finances slip into crisis mode.

They become conditions of life that God can use to shape our lives into more obedient, more responsive and attentive lives of service to Him.

Hear me correctly. I'm not saying that every time someone or some group experiences this sort of thing, that it comes as a judgement from God. Absolutely not.

But I am saying that such events can have an amazing way of sharpening the spiritual focus and clarity in a person's life. And it is also amazing that the most humble and effective servants and institutions in the Kingdom of Christ just about always have gone through some form of crisis somewhere along the way. Not always, but very, very often they have spent time in the belly of the fish.

It is in the tight spaces

where we having nothing else to distract us

where temptation is exposed for the fraud that it is

where our finitude and frailty are revealed

that we find God's call renewed; His voice clarified.

C. S. Lewis has said: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks into our conscience, but shouts in our pain." [in *The Problem Of Pain*]

It is also those tight spaces that we try to avoid.
After all, who likes disaster, pain or difficulty in their lives?
Who wakes up, hoping crisis will strike their congregation?

Yet - maybe we shouldn't be so quick to avoid tight spaces.
Maybe not.

Consider with me the commemoration of the greatest "tight space" moment in history, when the second Jonah was down in the deep.

Think of Christ confined in the grave. Matthew 12 makes the direct connection between Jonah and Jesus - both down and out, confined in a grave-like setting for three days and three nights.

In Jesus' confinement, and then his third-day release, **we** find life.

It is **absolutely** central to our eternal being.

We know that. We acknowledge that.

But we don't really like to dwell on it. Not really. While we celebrate Easter, and even have a very solemn Good Friday service - tell me, what do we do with Holy Saturday. Did you even know there was a day with that name?

Holy Saturday - between the Friday and the Sunday. It's the day marking Christ's entombment. It marks Christ's Jonah time.

Most of us use that day to travel, or bake, or clean the house before guests arrive the next day. But in the ancient liturgy of the church it was a time for stillness, for waiting, for watching, for vigil. Christ was in the tomb. Christ was buried. He was confined. The world holds its breath.

In Christ's Jonah experience, in his confinement, we find life! Death, our ultimate enemy, is defeated from within. "He (Christ) gave Himself as a ransom to death in which we were held captive, sold under sin. Descending into Hades through the Cross ... He loosed the bonds of death" (Liturgy of St. Basil).

An old Orthodox hymn says:

*Come, let us see our Life lying in the tomb,
that He may give life to those that in their tombs lie dead.
Come, let us look today on the Son of Judah as He sleeps,
and with the prophet let us cry aloud to Him:*

*Thou hast lain down,
Thou hast slept as a lion;
who shall awaken Thee, O King?
But of Thine own free will do Thou rise up,
who willingly dost give Thyself for us.*

O Lord, glory to Thee.

I wonder why we don't commemorate this day any longer. Could it be in part because of how uncomfortable that day is? Could it be part of our dislike for places and times of confinement?

Lets not be so fast to run from it.

From the confinement of Christ.

From seeking to find where God is present in our own moments of crisis.

And then, from following the exhortations of the New Testament, especially Paul, when he challenges us to actually import times and places of confinement into our lives.

The New Testament uses the image of an athlete, and athletic discipline, to describe the Christian life. Training, buffeting, competing, running. They are words of faith - words of exertion, confinement, limitation, even denial.

The life of a believer is not meant to ramble every which way.

It is not about everything goes.

There is to be structure.

There needs to be disciplined living for Christians.

And - in some real way - that is confining!

Beginning with the basic discipline displayed by Jonah 2.
Jonah prays.

Notice how he prays - it is the prayer of a studied believer.
By the way, do you see anything about the words of Jonah's prayer.
Do they seem vaguely familiar to you?
Where else have you seen them?

They're straight from the Psalms.
Verse 2 comes from Psalm 18.
Verse 3 comes from Psalm 42.
Verse 4 comes from Psalm 31.

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.

A great part of Reformed tradition is singing the Psalms. I'm glad to see new melodies and versifications bubbling to the surface in the last few years, reinvigorating that tradition.
A great discipline is learning to pray the Psalms. It enriches and deepens one's devotional and prayer life. Take work? Yup. But the reading and praying of the Psalms gives structure and voice to some of the deepest places of the soul.
In giving pastoral visitation training I keep saying, "When you visit use the Psalms. Read them. Pray phrases from them. The connections are immediate and deep."

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. If you don't already, may I encourage you to begin reading one Psalm a day.

Eugene Peterson writes, "*We become what we are called to be by praying. And we start out by praying from the belly of the fish.*"

[*Under The Unpredictable Plant*, p.74]

Build your disciplines - your deliberate tight space - the space where temptations are revealed, the power of evil lessened, and the voice of God clarified. It is where we are taken back from wandering to our Tarshish and set back – each day and week again – on the road where God wants us to be.

For we,
we are Jonah.