

“WHEN ALL YOU HAVE IS PRAYER”

Jonah 1:17 -2:10

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

So we come to what most people think of as the main part of Jonah's story... Jonah and the fish. After we read that "the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights," we're primed to hear more about it: We want to know something about that fish. We want to hear what Jonah experienced. What did he do? How did he survive? But the story is strangely silent about the details. We want to know about what it's like inside the belly of the fish. Instead we learn about what's going on inside of Jonah.

Most of this part of the story is not story at all, but a prayer.

It's hard, though, for us to get past the circumstances of that prayer as quickly as the narrator does. It's not just that the story has engaged our imaginations in wondering what it would be like to be swallowed by a fish. And we don't have to be biblical literalists to feel this way, do we? Having entered into the world of the story, we naturally find ourselves trying to imagine it. But it's more than that. This story draws us into a complicated muddle of emotions.

On the one hand, it is a kind of broad comedy. It looks like Jonah's going to drown... then he's "rescued"... by a fish... which swallows him whole (and still alive!) Was there ever a crazier, more ridiculously unbelievable story? And was there ever a prophet as hapless and inept as Jonah? We want to laugh, at the very idea of this poor guy trapped inside a fish, and the foolishness that landed Jonah in this predicament. And that's ok. The humor is entirely intentional.

But on the other hand, if you suspend skepticism (as the best novels enable us to do) and accept the world of the story... how completely terrifying it is! Being on a boat in a storm is no joke. Just imagine being thrown into the sea in the midst of it... then encountering a huge sea creature. Imagine the sensations, the darkness, the feeling of being trapped. We might not believe that the story is "real" in the sense of being factual or historical, but we know that fear is real, and so is danger.

So part of us wants to laugh at this story. But we also sense the pull of the cold undercurrent of terror.

It's brilliant, really, how this story – so outlandish in the plot details – rings true-to-life when it comes to the emotions that come with being human in this scary world. We make foolish choices and at any moment we might find ourselves stuck in some ridiculous predicament... but at the same time, fear is never far away.

So from that perspective, prayer at this point of the story makes perfect sense. Jonah's beyond any human help. He can't help himself. He can't take back his foolish choices. He can't escape the terrifying nearness of death. There's really nothing else he can do except turn to God.

But I'd have expected a desperate cry for help, wouldn't you? Or a last-breath plea for mercy and forgiveness before dying? Maybe some expression of pain, or even anger. Or just a prayer that it would all be over quickly.

This prayer isn't any of those things.

It's a psalm of thanksgiving, very like other such prayers and songs found in the book of Psalms and elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures.

If that seems strange to you, I'm right there with you. I'd be all for a more honest-and-from-the-gut prayer here. Something more like Lamentations, or one of the angry Psalms. I could picture him just crying "help, help" or calling God's name over and over. Or maybe just crying. That can be prayer, too. But a prayer of thanksgiving doesn't seem to fit the situation.

I know that we are supposed to praise God at all times and in all places. There are even believers who go so far as to say we should be thankful *for* suffering, losses, disappointments, failures, and all the terrible things that happen.

I always want to be cautious about advising this attitude.

It's presumptuous to tell someone who is suffering to be thankful. It verges on making light of pain, or saying that it's a good thing, or that it's God's will – all problematic implications. And I'm not in favor of encouraging any kind of pretense in prayer. As scripture attests, God can and does hear, accept, and welcome our heartfelt expressions of pain and sorrow and even anger.

But there must be something to this "radical gratitude" that is part of our tradition. Because the practice has a long, long history. It goes back further than the book of Jonah, which was probably written around 500 BCE, although the story itself and its setting are much older. Just to be clear, I don't think this is about denial of pain or about mustering up a phony cheerfulness and calling it faith. This is gratitude *in spite of*. It is about radical trust that God is good, no matter how things look and no matter what happens. And that God, as our Creator, is worthy of praise, no matter what we happen to be experiencing or feeling. This is at the heart of the book of Jonah.

But to be honest, Jonah's prayer doesn't sound all that thankful at the start. Like a typical psalm of thanksgiving, it starts out with a little recital of his troubles. In fact, it verges on blaming God for Jonah's predicament. ("You cast me into the sea, the waters closed over me.")

But he knows or believes that God hears him. He acknowledges God as the only possible deliverer.

It's worth noticing what *isn't* in Jonah's prayer though. Does he admit that he was wrong or say that he's sorry for disobeying God? Not a word. Does he ask for help? Not exactly. In fact, his prayer strikes us as a little bit presumptuous in thanking God for a deliverance that hasn't happened yet. He promises that he will be faithful and continue to worship and give thanks to God. Admittedly, it doesn't look like Jonah will be doing anything, faithful or otherwise. But this vow to be faithful and to make offerings of thankfulness to God is a standard part of a psalm of thanksgiving, so it's part of Jonah's prayer, too.

This particular prayer may have predated the book of Jonah and been incorporated here because of its references to the sea, waves, waters, deeps... which in another context would be read as metaphors for troubles, fear, or chaos. Here these deep water metaphors remind us that Jonah is in deep trouble spiritually as well as physically.

Which is part of why the prayer comes as something of a surprise. Up until now we have had little reason to see Jonah as a prayerful or spiritual or reflective kind of guy. Maybe there is more to Jonah than we thought or maybe something has changed for him. Or maybe when all that's left is prayer, that's what you do. Maybe you can't even articulate your own prayer; maybe you only have words from a prayer you heard or learned a long time ago. Could Jonah's prayer be something like that?

The narrator says that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, and then he prayed to God. Maybe it takes time for some people to turn to God, even in the most extreme distress. Maybe it's hard to admit that you have no recourse but prayer, no other help but God? To acknowledge that God is God, no matter what happens? Maybe it takes time to get to that radical gratitude.

Perhaps it doesn't even matter what or how Jonah prayed. Just that he prayed. In any case, the prayer is a turning point. The story moves in a different direction from here. Until now, the story has taken Jonah down, and down, and further down. In chapter one, he "went down to Joppa" to get on a boat. Then he went "down into the hold of the ship." Then down into the water, and down into the fish's belly. Finally, in this prayer, he says, "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever" – in other words, to the land of the dead, because all hope of surviving was gone.

But then he says, "Yet you brought my life up from the Pit, O Lord my God."

In the belly of the fish, in his lowest, darkest place, when he has reached the very bottom-most bottom, where there is nothing more he can do, ... Jonah finds himself resting on the grace of God. And God brings him back up.

The fish, which has done nothing much for the last little while but be the stage for Jonah's spiritual drama, comes back into focus and (at God's command) spews Jonah out onto the shore. And presumably swims away and disappears from the story.

Is it a happy ending? Well, for now. But God isn't done with Jonah. And don't forget that in his prayer, Jonah made some vows to God – kind of vague vows, but still – a reminder that Jonah has a mission that isn't fulfilled yet, and perhaps a hint that the story isn't over. But don't forget that we're reading a comic tale here. Anything can happen.

One thing we have learned – and Jonah seems to have learned by now – is that God is in charge. And God is a God of surprises, second chances, grace, and a sense of humor. Jonah's journey isn't over yet, and we'll have to see where God takes Jonah – and us – next.

Resources:

James Limburg, *Hosea – Micah (Interpretation Commentary)*

Alyce M. McKenzie and Charles L. Aaron, Jr., eds, *Parental Guidance Advised: Adult Preaching from the Old Testament*.