

"The Hound of Heaven"

sermon digest

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Jonah 2:1-10

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The Psalm of Jonah from the belly of a fish might have been found in the Jewish Psalter and sung in the synagogue for one recovering from a serious illness or one who has survived a life-threatening ordeal. The lament quickly turns into a song of thanksgiving and praise to the God who delivers from the "Pit." As a poetic prayer of thanksgiving to God, it is as good as any found in the Psalter, but it is totally out of character for Jonah.

The contradictory psalm seems to have been lifted from another source. God does not cast Jonah into the deep, as the psalm laments. Jonah is thrown overboard by the crew—at Jonah's instruction, no less! Jonah was not "driven" from God's sight; Jonah ran from the presence of God. Jonah's prayer of distress does not sound like one who seems to prefer death to obedience. The prayer might indicate genuine repentance, but it does not fit the Jonah pictured either before or after the fish. If Jonah repented, it did not last. The only consistency between the story and the psalm is dissonance—a misfit psalm for a misfit prophet.

Phyllis Tribble notes that the psalm also presents a self-absorbed Jonah: "The psalm speaks to an indissoluble link between suffering and egotism. Jonah's self-assertive actions and attitude have led to his subterranean predicament. Although his prayer of eight verses is ostensibly thanksgiving to God, in it he uses the first-person singular twenty-six times as subject, object, or possessive. None of these references is self-effacing; they are all boastful. Egotism inflicts suffering; suffering fosters egotism. This episode unflinchingly presents an existential predicament." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, VII, p.508)

Furthermore, Tribble observes that the psalm opens the story to allegory, an approach to interpretation that became quite popular among Jews and Christians. Allegory, this is that, was a means to avoid the obvious teaching of a text especially when it was found to be an embarrassment. Being swallowed by a fish, like the "sign of Jonah" in the Gospels, was a symbol for a near-death experience. The fish is the medium descending into the depths of the sea—*sheol*, the grave. The fish also serves as a transition to another chance at life. Tribble notes that the gender of the fish changes in the story from male to female, and Jonah's fate shifts from a stomach digesting a meal to a womb giving life. However, when Jonah is deposited by the fish on the shore near Nineveh, the verb is "vomit," suitably more disgusting than a suggestion that he was "born again" by a fish.

The message concerns the nature of God. Considering the obsession with the man, the egotistical Jonah is not the real subject of the story. The inspired author is making a statement about the nature of God and perhaps challenging an existing misconception about the mind of God. Lutheran editor Frederick Gaiser notes the conflict between the Jonah story and the Prophet Nahum: "Nahum proclaims the God that Jonah wanted!" We might add that Jonah gets the God that neither he nor his prophetic family can envision, a God of compassion, a God who is able to transform a city.

Has it occurred to you that if God could deliver Jonah through the agency of a fish, God could deliver a message to the people of Nineveh without the agency of Jonah? Perhaps there is more to Jonah than meets the eye. The great fish that swallowed Jonah is not a test of how much of the Bible we can swallow; it is a message of the persistence of God to accomplish God's purpose in our world. Is Jonah a sample of Augustine's "irresistible grace of God?" I would rather speak of God's inexhaustible determination. God called Jonah to proclaim his word to the Ninevites. With or without Jonah, the message would be delivered, but God is determined that Jonah is to be the instrument of the message. God does not need Jonah to accomplish the mission, but Jonah needs a new vision of God. The grace of God affirming Jonah's purpose and enhancing his value as a person is as great as the grace that redeems Nineveh.

Francis Thompson, like Jonah, was a drop-out on life. His poem "The Hound of Heaven" was sheer autobiography. He was a dreamer who could never hold a job. After seven years of study for the priesthood, he was urged to find another vocation. Although a brilliant and creative mind, Thompson failed in medical school and became a friendless recluse, finally seeking comfort in opium. In despair, Thompson submitted a poem to editor Wilfrid Meynell. Meynell saw his writing and recognized his potential. The Meynells took Thompson into their home, encouraged his gift, and not only rescued him from the miserable existence of an addict, but discovered one of England's great minds.

Thompson saw God in these acts of kindness and wrote about the God of relentless pursuit:

I fled Him, down the arches of the years; /I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears /I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped; /And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase, /And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy, /They beat - and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet -/All things betray thee, who betrayest Me'.

Like Jonah, Thompson encountered the God who transcends not only our existence, but also our futile attempts to escape our very existence.

I was a child, we lived near a creek which was full of snapping turtles. I watched one day with fascination while two men dug the reptiles out of the mud for turtle soup. I was not very interested in the cuisine, but I was impressed by the warning: "If they bite, they won't turn loose until it thunders." How persistent turtles must be! That is the story of Jonah: How persistent God must be!

We search for God until God finds us. Religion concerns the human quest for god. One of the great theologians of our age Karl Barth insisted that faith proceeds from the initiative and acts of God in revelation and that all religion is a futile grope for God. Barth proclaimed that we do not find God; God finds us. The Word becomes flesh. The God of creation owns all of the initiative. We only know God through revelation never through human reason or the religious quest regardless of our egotistical assumption. The story of Jonah is Barthian, about the God of relentless pursuit. Jonah's God is not an object to be discovered through human genius and initiative. God is the transcendent Subject who issues commands and follows through with results.

I am not fully convinced by Barth that the God who created human genius did not want us to employ all of our gifts in the religious quest. Yet, the story clearly distinguishes the God of Jonah from the deities which we manufacture with our imagination or our religion. Barth is right that any god which humans concoct or control is not the God of the universe. The message is pointed: God is not only bigger than Nineveh and Assyria, God is bigger than Jerusalem and Judah. God is greater than the wildest human imagination. The lesson has been hard-learned by the Jews through a half-century of exile among foreigners and strangers. God is not only capable of crossing Jewish borders; God transcends all human bounds. No matter where we deliberately go to flee from the presence of the eternal Spirit, God is there ahead of us. The God who created the heavens and the earth, the sea as well as the dry land, is free and does indeed dwell in the whole creation.

The biblical figure of the divine Spirit is the air that we breathe. Thus, the Creator gave life to Adam by breathing "air-breath-spirit" into the man. Jonah suggests an experiment in control. If Jonah can escape the air, perhaps he can hide from God. Where can he flee from the presence of the Creator except the sea, or perhaps the grave? Here the divine Spirit must be limited, and Jonah remains in control. Jonah takes flight into the one place on earth where he believes God to be incapable of following, yet he ironically identifies his God to the sailors: "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." One would suspect that the Creator is not unfamiliar with the sea, but something else is at stake here. Jonah prefers death to the divine presence, and we are reminded of the inescapable presence of God in Psalm 139: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there."

The God we cannot see or fully grasp is most visible in the darkness. Jonah is indeed a scoundrel, but he is the scoundrel in each of us. This comic Hebrew character is more interested in avoiding than finding God, and I am not sure that the universal love of God ever really sinks in with this so-called prophet, but the psalm of Jonah from the belly of the fish is the one element of piety that seems familiar. The only time in the entire story where the man seems to care about anyone or anything is when he is in distress. The God who reaches every corner of our lives meets us in the darkness. It is a strange phenomenon with universal implications, we often see God more clearly in the darkness than in the light. When all else fails and every possible escape is closed, we become

aware of God's persistent grace.

The most difficult word from the cross, the only word affirmed by more than one Gospel is the cry of abandonment: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Carlyle Marney made the audacious declaration that God was never more anywhere than there with Jesus on the cross. The God of Jesus and Jonah is the God who meets us in the depths of the darkest hour of life.