

God Recruits a Fish; Jonah Receives a Rescue – Jonah 1:17-2:10

Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:38-42

Introduction

Last summer the world was riveted by the account of the boys' soccer team from Thailand that was trapped deep in a cave that was filling with water due to monsoon rains

On June 23, 2018 twelve members of the team ranging in age from 11 to 17 years old along with their 25 year old assistant coach who had gone into the cave after a team practice to explore were trapped by heavy rains that began shortly thereafter

The cave system they were exploring normally floods when the monsoon season arrives and there are signs at the mouth to the cave warning against entering the caves during the months of July through November

But last year the rains came quite a bit earlier than normal and the group was caught unaware roughly 2.5 miles from the cave entrance

According to Wikipedia "The rescue effort involved more than 10,000 people, including over 100 divers, many rescue workers, representatives from about 100 governmental agencies, 900 police officers and 2,000 soldiers, and required ten police helicopters, seven police ambulances, more than 700 diving cylinders, and the pumping of more than a billion liters of water out of the caves."

Sadly, there was one fatality as a former Thai Nave SEAL died of asphyxiation while returning to a staging base in the cave after delivering supplies of air but all of the boys and their coach were ultimately rescued over a 3-day period with the last of them being brought out on July 10, 2018

It was without a doubt a remarkable rescue – one that was characterized by extreme bravery and ingenuity

And yet, our passage this morning contains an even more remarkable rescue

One that didn't involve great assets and multi-national efforts

All that was needed was a great fish – but that's because the fish was directed by our great God

While there is obviously a miraculous element to the account that is hardly the most remarkable thing about it

The most remarkable thing about the rescue is that God bothered with it at all

Jonah was a prophet who had been faithful to God in the past but now he had proven himself to be rebellious

Unwilling to carry God's message to his enemies in Nineveh, Jonah had boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, the furthest known place in the opposite direction, in an attempt to run from God

And Jonah was also unrepentant as he resisted giving in to God's efforts to turn him back by hurling a huge storm at Jonah's ship –

As it turned out, Jonah would rather die than give in to what God required of him so he instructed the sailors on board to throw him into the sea in order to *assuage* God's anger and save themselves

And as much as the sailors didn't want to risk harming God's prophet they ultimately saw they had no choice

So they prayed for forgiveness and hurled Jonah into the sea – and when Jonah hit the water God calmed the storm

And if we view God in the Old Testament the way many people do we would see drowning as a fitting end for Jonah

After all, we might reason, the God of the Old Testament is a harsh and perhaps even cruel God who tolerates no dissent

So smiting a rogue prophet would be about what we would expect

It's odd when we realize that we believe that God loves the lost enough to have sent his only Son so that they might have eternal life while at the same time we also believe that God is just waiting to knock us flat if we step out of line once we're in the family

With that kind of mental imaging going it's no wonder that most of us are reluctant to take risks for God

A recent survey by the Barna Group showcases the result of that way of thinking

It shows how across all age groups believers are virtually unanimous in accepting that part of the Christian faith means being a witness for Jesus Christ and that the best thing that could possibly happen to someone is for them to personally come to know Jesus

And right around 90% of those polled answered they knew how to respond when someone raises questions about faith
But still, most believers admit they never actually share their faith – Why?

It would seem that it's not a lack of understanding **the role of a Christian** or **the importance of the mission** or even a **lack of knowledge** that stops most believers from sharing their faith

From what has been shared with me personally, **the number one reason most people give for not witnessing for Christ is that they are afraid of messing it up** – so many people sublet their witness by introducing their friends to their pastor or some other “more mature” believer who they think can do a better job of sharing Christ

And if you're afraid of getting whacked for messing up; avoidance seems to be a reasonable course to take

I once had a boss who could not be pleased no matter what happened and every decision or action was loudly criticized
The result was that people stopped trying to excel because they knew they could never do enough and since they would be in trouble no matter what they did, the easiest thing was to put forth the least amount of effort possible, to never extend themselves, and to just ride out the inevitable tirades for being lazy –

At least, they reasoned, since they were going to be chewed out anyway they had spared themselves some effort

But as we are going to see this morning, God isn't like that at all

God loves to demonstrate extreme patience and mercy not just with our inadequacies but even when one of his children behaves like Jonah

Please open your Bible and join me in Jonah where we will be looking at **Jonah 1:17-2:10** and follow along as I read the entire passage

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

“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.

For 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.

Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’

The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at 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.

When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

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

If you are taking notes the main points for this morning's sermon are:

I. God **Rescues** II. Jonah **Prays** III. God **Delivers**

I. God Rescues

Reality of the great fish

Unfortunately, we can't talk about the book of Jonah without at least briefly addressing the reality of the great fish

This is the part of Jonah that causes critics to dismiss the account as a myth or fairy tale because they claim there is no known sea creature that could swallow a man and no way that if a man were swallowed he could survive for three days inside the fish

But **verse 17** states emphatically that "...the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights."

The Hebrew word translated as "appointed" is used throughout the Old Testament when someone or something is counted or *assigned for a purpose* – think of how we used to be told to line up and count off by some number to form teams

In other words, this particular fish was on a God-given mission

Some have said it could well have been a whale shark which as you can see from these pictures looks perfectly capable of swallowing a man

There are those who point out that the throat of a whale shark is normally too small to accommodate a man and that whale sharks eat plankton and would never be interested in eating something as large as a man

However, they fail to mention that the whale shark's esophagus is elastic and they feed by simply opening their mouths and swimming around catching whatever comes in and then regurgitate anything that doesn't suit them

Some have said it also could have been a sperm whale which is also large enough to swallow a man and known to swallow squid that are far larger than a human being whole

There is an account of a whaler named James Bartley who, in 1891, fell overboard while harpooning a sperm whale and disappeared only to be found unconscious but alive in the stomach of the whale days later once the other sailors had finally gotten it aboard and began cutting it up

While some claim the account was carefully investigated at the time and is true, the story has since been called into question as others say the widow of the ship's captain denied it ever happened so we can't know with any certainty whether it really happened or not

The fact is, we don't know what kind of fish God appointed and it could have been a fish that God created just for this purpose – do we really think that's beyond the ability for God who created the universe in the first place?

But one thing we do know is that the account of Jonah *is* true because God's Word says it's true

Even Jesus referred to the account of Jonah as an historical fact as we heard in our Scripture reading from **Matthew 12**

While it's always nice to have external support for what the Bible says, it isn't necessary because our first and primary source for truth is the Bible

In **Psalms 119:160** the psalmist declares: "*The sum of your word is truth...*"

So we know beyond a shadow of doubt that God appointed this great fish to swallow Jonah – not for a meal but to rescue Jonah from certain death by drowning

And that should give us assurance that God isn't going to nuke us if we mess up

After all, could we possibly mess up more than Jonah has at this point of the account?

Jonah didn't just fumble the ball or stumble in his execution of God's plan – he ran away from it!

Sure, God had to engage in some tough love to get Jonah's attention as we saw him hurl a violent storm at Jonah's ship – a storm that resulted in Jonah being hurled into the sea presumably to die a watery death

And as we're going to see here in just a minute or two, Jonah was sure he was a goner which had to terrify him

But God doesn't nuke his children when they step out of line and God wasn't punishing Jonah with the storm – he was getting Jonah's attention

God is longsuffering and will go to great lengths to rescue us when we go astray

And God sent a "lifeboat" to save his reluctant, rebellious prophet because he still had a job for Jonah to complete

How do you think you might react if you were to find yourself sinking into the depths of the ocean only to find yourself suddenly in the belly of a fish?

We see that the account before us says that Jonah prayed

II. Jonah Prays

But first we see that Jonah hit the water and continued his downward trend

The storm above had instantly abated to the amazement of the sailors on board but Jonah didn't really have much time to notice

Jonah was on what he thought was a one-way trip to the bottom of the sea

If you're like me this section seems a bit jumbled and that's because Jonah is recounting what happened as a kind of **flashback remembrance of the events that had transpired while he was sitting in the belly of the fish**

If you're a fan of movies you know that they often use the motif of a flashback in the telling of the story and sometimes those flashbacks can confuse the action a bit and they may require some sorting out

And that's what we have here before us

When we read the beginning of chapter 2 that Jonah prayed from the belly of the fish saying... we naturally come to the conclusion that all that follows happened while Jonah was in the belly of the fish but it didn't – Let me explain

Verses 2-6a describe what Jonah was experiencing as he sank into the sea and verse 7 also relates his condition before the fish came along

But Jonah mixes in what he felt and did after he was swallowed by the fish which forces us to sort it all out

Just look at how Jonah describes his descent –

In **verse 3** – *"...you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and billows passed over me"*

Then skip down to **verse 5-6** where we read – *"The waters closed in over me to take my life' the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever..."*

That's the situation Jonah was in when he prayed the prayer he references in verse 2

Try to put yourself in Jonah's place with seaweed wrapped around your head and having your feet touch the sea floor

Jonah saw himself as being at the threshold of the grave, what he calls the belly of Sheol, and ready to step over it

And worse than that he felt estranged from God as we see in the beginning words of verse 4 – *"I am driven away from your sight"*

Jonah knew he had damaged his relationship with God by his rebellion and he felt the spiritual separation

And in that moment, Jonah had no option but to pray

The desperation we feel after hitting bottom often results in the best prayers simply because all of our other options have been exhausted

I'm reminded of the man who was very sick and lying in the hospital waiting for his doctor to come and deliver a diagnosis of his condition and a prognosis for recovery when his pastor showed up for a visit

And when the pastor assured the man that the entire church was praying for him night and day the man, quite alarmed replied, “Oh dear, so it’s come down to that has it?”

Having nowhere else to turn is quite often what it takes to bring us to our knees

And desperate prayers are typically direct prayers that get right to the heart of the matter

All of a sudden, as he was sinking, Jonah decided that he didn’t really want to die after all

But death was pressing in on Jonah and it appears that he did as many of us do during times of duress – he made promises to God

In the second part of **verse 9** Jonah says “...*what I have vowed I will repay*” which makes it seem to reveal that he had tried to bargain with God on the way down

And we all know that’s a common response when we find ourselves in a mess

There’s no way to know just how many promises have been made to do whatever God wants us to do if only he will get us out of our current predicament – but I’m fairly certain there have been more of those promises made than kept

But Jonah is thankful to be alive and he commits to doing what God wants even after he has been saved by the fish

Jonah is happy to find himself alive in the belly of the fish as God has delivered him from the pit of death and he looks forward to his ultimate deliverance as God has assured him that he will once more see God’s holy temple

And his recounting of his time in the great fish is delivered in the style of a psalm of thanksgiving as Jonah praises God for his deliverance

Actually, much of what Jonah’s fish belly prayer could have come from the Psalms - look at these examples:

Psalm 18:6 - *In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.* – sounds a lot like the beginning of verse 2

Psalm 42:7 - *Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.* – sounds like the end of verse 3

Psalm 31:22 – *I had said in my alarm, “I am cut off from your sight.” But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help.* – is similar to Jonah’s expressed sentiment found in verse 4

But Jonah’s flowery and poetic language was actually a kind of faux spirituality that masked what was really going on

Because Jonah really hasn’t experienced a true change of heart

Actually, it’s kind of comical that Jonah speaks as he does while unknowingly allowing his true feelings slip as he tries to blame God for his predicament and completely ignores his own rebellion

Look at **verse 3** again where Jonah tells God – “*you cast me into the deep...*”

Right. That’s kind of like telling the police officer, “You gave me the ticket that cost me my license” after speeding

Jonah’s newfound commitment to doing what God wants is a matter of being backed into a corner, or **attrition**, and not a matter of **contrition** that would reveal a changed heart

Contrition is deep sorrow and self-condemnation, with thorough repentance for sin because it is displeasing to God

It implies a feeling of love toward God that compels one to desire to do God’s will

Attrition is merely sorrow for sin, or imperfect, counterfeit repentance produced by fear of punishment

It’s the giving in that comes from the feeling of being worn down and seeing no other viable option

And we see that Jonah relents but he doesn’t repent

Jonah is like a naughty child who can be made to stand in a corner while still refusing to conform

Without a doubt, Jonah was grateful to God for saving his life and he says the right things and he promises to perform the right actions but he still has a rotten attitude –

An attitude we're going to see vividly displayed when we get to chapter 4

But God knows that, while repentance is an action that must be taken, it's also a process that must be undertaken

And we see that God delivers Jonah in spite of his imperfect response

III. God Delivers

It's easy to miss if you're not careful but I want you to notice that Jonah had sat in the belly of the fish for three days and nights before he finally gave in

Because the language used indicates that God immediately commanded the fish to return Jonah to dry land as soon as Jonah yielded

Look with me at **verse 10** which says immediately after Jonah acknowledged that salvation is God's domain – *“And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land”*

Imagine what it must have been like being in the belly of a fish

One author describes it this way,

“Pitch black. Sloshing gastric juices wash over you burning skin, eyes, throat, and nostrils. Oxygen is scarce and each frantic gulp of air is saturated with salt water. The rancid smell of digested food causes you to throw up repeatedly until you only have dry heaves left. Everything you touch has the slimy feel of the mucous membrane that lines the stomach. You feel claustrophobic. With every turn and dive of the great fish you slip and slide in the cesspool of digestive fluid. There are no footholds...”

If that's not an exact description of Jonah's experience it's probably close enough and Jonah put up with that for three days before he gave in - You have to give Jonah his due – he was one stubborn guy!

God didn't allow Jonah to drown but we have to wonder, after three days of Jonah's headstrong refusal to give in, why God didn't just allow the fish to digest Jonah and be done with it – God is so patient

God allowed Jonah to have his way until he was positioned in the best possible place to get his attention

Then God hurled a storm at him and caused him to be cast into the sea only to provide him with a fish for a lifeboat
And still Jonah resisted

Again, God wasn't punishing Jonah God was seeking to reach him and teach him out of his love for him

And as we've been seeing over and over again we can't help but be reminded that we can be a lot like Jonah

And if or when God has to take us to “fish-school” it will be for the same reason

How often do we know what God wants us to do and still rebel?

What extreme measures might God need to take in order to turn our hearts and wills back to him?

Fish-belly experiences come in a lot of different guises – financial crises, relationship problems, physical and emotional illnesses, having your foolishness exposed publicly...

Just like with Jonah, when we refuse to learn from and submit to God's Word he can and will teach us by other means because he loves us too much to leave us alone

Jonah may have been wrong in his motivations, incomplete in his repentance, and stubborn in his attitude but God accepted Jonah's willingness to obey in spite of all that

Jonah's turn toward God was imperfect and incomplete but he agreed to go to Nineveh as God had commanded

And God accepted that as good enough for the time being as Jonah was finally delivered onto terra firma safe and sound

And the reality is as uncomfortable and frightening Jonah's experience surely was, Jonah was never out of God's sovereign care and never in any real danger

There was absolutely no time that Jonah wasn't nestled firmly in God's hand and nothing could happen to Jonah that was outside of God's control

In the first chapter of Job we see God repeatedly set limits on what Satan could do to Job which tells us that God stands as a gatekeeper over our lives and nothing can touch us unless God permits it

I find it very comforting to know that no matter how bad things seem; that God's Word shows me that God is always in control and it tells me that God loves me and only wants the very best for me – and, while that may mean taking me through some unpleasant lessons Jonah's experience shows me that God will never disown me or give up on me

Conclusion

We love rescue stories – perhaps because we want to be assured that rescue is possible

And really, when you take time to think about it, God is in the rescue business

Ever since our first parents, Adam and Eve, decided to question God's word to them and sinned in the Garden of Eden all mankind has stood in need of rescue

And we know that God made rescue and reconciliation available for all through his Son's death on our behalf

But even after we have taken part in that greatest of rescues by accepting and relying on the sacrifice of Jesus for our own, personal sins – we still need to be rescued from time to time

Whether it's because we've blundered innocently into a dire situation like the soccer team from Thailand or rebelled and tried to go our own way like Jonah, we still need God to step in and rescue us

I can't tell you why God has chosen to use imperfect people to carry out his plan for evangelizing and discipling the world – but he did

And because he did, he knows we will need to have our fat pulled out of the fire again and again

Rest assured that no situation is so bad that God can't make the best of it – we can't possibly mess things up to the point where God can't straighten them out because nothing is impossible with God

As Jonah illustrates so plainly, we can't even mess things up by running away from God because we can't run far enough or fast enough that he can't track us down and bring us back

Maybe you recognize this morning that you have been telling God, "No" to something he wants you to do

I don't know what form that might take – it could be most anything –but you know you've been running from God in your heart if not with your feet

Will you accept that you are already caught this morning and stop running before God has to take some more drastic measure to get your attention?

Maybe you've just been more fearful than rebellious and you're simply afraid you'll make a mess of whatever it is that God is asking you to do

You need to recognize that yesterday's failures can be used by God today as he plants seeds for your future

Perhaps, like Jonah, the best you may be able to do is to change your actions and hope your attitude follows suit

I encourage you to take whatever steps you can – even if they're small

Listen, if God can rescue Jonah nothing you have done or not done can be so bad that he can't rescue you so stop worrying and get busy

Remember, God loves you and God is in the rescue business

Let's pray