

Praying When You are Down

Second in a series of four sermons on Jonah

A sermon preached at

Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church

Edmonton, Alberta

October 19, 2014

by Carol Penner

Text Jonah 1:17-2:10

Today's scripture shows a man who is very down. The Hebrew words for down and deep are used over and over again in Chapters 1 & 2. Jonah goes down to Joppa, down to the port, down below the deck of the ship and lying down, he falls into a deep sleep. Finally Jonah goes down into the water, he is cast into the deep. The deep surrounds him at the roots of the mountains. Jonah faces Sheol, the Under-world, the Pit.

Jonah descends to the depths in this story, but he arrives, by the end of chapter two, at the surface alive again, by the grace of God. Going to the depths and coming up again...that's something all human beings can relate to, even today. The translatability of this story to today's world, combined with the vivid imagery may explain why this story has had such lasting power in our culture.

My sermon today has two parts. In the first part I want to look at some artist's depictions of Jonah and in the second part we'll look more specifically at the prayer that composes chapter two.



For millennia artists have been illustrating the Bible. They try to get to the heart of the story by the way they picture what is happening. Interestingly, in early Christian art the most frequently illustrated Old Testament story is the story of Jonah! Of all the stories in the Hebrew Bible, this is the one that resonated with them most! This first slide is from a prayer book made for the Duke of Burgundy in the 1400s. It shows the burial of Christ as its main picture. But the burial is juxtaposed with another image at the corner of the page, let's look at it more closely.



It's the picture of Jonah being thrown into the sea. The early church saw strong parallels between Jesus and Jonah, because both went down to the Pit, the depths of the earth. Jonah went to the brink of death, and Jesus into death itself and both emerged by the grace of God. Jesus himself saw these parallels, talking about the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:38-42). The early Christians saw obvious parallels between Christian baptism and the story of Jonah. You go underwater, and die to sin and are born again, for new life.



These two slides show the great fall of Jonah, where he is almost universally shown as falling down headfirst.



This slide is of an early Christian sarcophagus (a stone box to hold a dead body). The image of Jonah being swallowed by the fish is carved on it as a symbol of hope. Just as Jonah was swallowed by the whale and went down to the bottom of the sea, so too this person, swallowed in death by this stone sarcophagus, relies on God's grace to raise them up again.



Today's chapter from Jonah takes place almost entirely within the belly of the whale. There are thousands of artist's depictions of Jonah through church history but for some reason I couldn't find a single historical picture of Jonah in the belly of the whale. Artists from earlier centuries concentrated on the time when he was falling into the fish or when he was coming out of the fish. Modern artists rarely show Jonah falling into the whale's mouth, or being thrown overboard, but frequently show Jonah in the belly of the whale. I wonder what that says about how we view the story in the modern world! Some of the Jonahs don't look too happy. Some give the whale an almost womb-like look, hinting at the new birth that is about to occur.



This glass sculpture renders the whale transparent, and we see Jonah sitting cross-legged in zen-like prayer meditation. In this picture, we see a figure of Jonah praying inside the whale and the whale in the act of turning up towards the light.



In this picture, we see a figure of Jonah praying inside the whale and the whale in the act of turning up towards the light.



I like this more abstract painting of Jonah. There's an emphasis on Jonah's hands lifted in supplication, his hands are like a keyhole, the way to salvation is through prayer. You see his words bubbling out of his mouth. Jonah is in the darkness of the whale. And yet there is an outline of the hand of God reaching into the picture. In Christian art history, the most popular image of Jonah comes from the last verse of chapter two, the big fish vomits Jonah out onto dry land.



Many paintings show Jonah emerging naked from the fish. He may have gone in fully clothed, but he is often born again naked. Jonah reaches out to God, and here that is visualized by having Jonah reaching towards the face of God in the cloud.



Many depictions of Jonah are in two parts, showing him going down and coming up, born again out of the mouth of the fish.



The phrase in the text is literally that the fish vomited Jonah onto the dry land...and here we see the force of that depicted.



In this picture Jonah seems overcome with the experience he has just had...in the background of this picture you can see Nineveh.



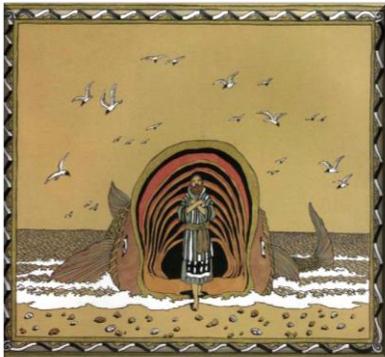
Jonah is praying as he emerges in front of Nineveh.



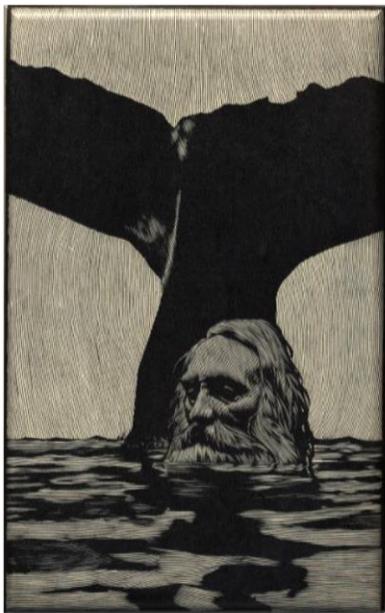
Here Jonah is birthed from the fish's mouth as a saint, complete with halo, with his eyes also fixed on the city of Nineveh.



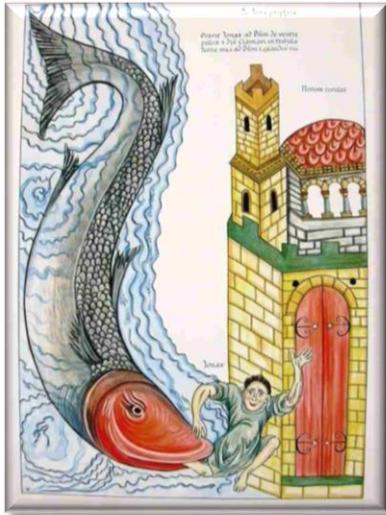
And here Jonah is depicted emerging with words that he must speak, symbolized by the page of text he is holding.



This more modern depiction shows Jonah calmly walking out of the whale's mouth (no vomiting here).



This rather famous picture of Jonah shows him old and tired looking, unwilling to come out of the water, perhaps expressing reluctance to go ahead with the task he is charged to do.



Contrast that picture with this one, an eleventh century drawing that shows a smiling Jonah being propelled to the door of Nineveh by this fish. He is happy no doubt to be out of the belly of the big fish!



This modern painting caught my attention. Here Jonah is on the shore. He almost looks like he is in the “starting gate position”, ready to run a race but he is looking forward with what kind of expression on his face? Sort of an “Oh no” expression! He has been saved but now what?



This is a pulpit, shaped like a whale, from a Polish church. I have seen other pulpits shaped like a whale, with the speaker emerging from the whale’s mouth. It’s a fascinating image. What a perfect way to show that your minister is not perfect either. They just came out of the pit, they have just been saved, and now they have to say what God wants them to say.

So then...what good news do we find in this text today, chapter two of Jonah? In this chapter we finally see Jonah praying. Did you notice that Jonah did not pray when God called him to go to Nineveh? He did not pray when he decided to reject that call. He did not pray as he went down to Joppa. He did not pray when he got on board the ship to Tarshish. He did not pray when the hurricane came or when the captain implored him to pray. He did not pray as the sailors prepare to throw him overboard into the sea.

Jonah **finally** prays when he is underwater and already swallowed by the whale. Jonah tells us in verse 7, “as my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord”. What does this prayer tell us about Jonah? What does it tell us about God?

The prayer of Jonah is a prayer of someone who has experienced that ultimate sinking feeling: a prayer of someone who has experienced the bottom dropping out of his life. It is a prayer from the pits, the depths of despair; a prayer of someone stepping back from the brink of death.

We have all been in Jonah's position to some degree or other. Maybe we were careless while we were driving and we almost killed someone or ourselves and we sit shaking by the side of the road, and we pray. Or maybe we cheated on an essay or exam, and are almost kicked out of school. Maybe we made a big mistake at work, and we could have lost our job but somehow disaster was averted and we sit at our desk and pray. Maybe we were unfaithful to a marriage partner, so we thought that the marriage would break but forgiveness was offered and we pray. We went to the brink of the pit and returned, and we pray.

Jonah prays, he calls to the Lord out of his distress. He describes his situation and his feelings about it: it involves the sea, the flood, billows, waters, drowning, weeds surrounding his head, the roots of mountains, life ebbing away.

But it's not just all about the crisis he is in. In this prayer we see Jonah remembering how he worshipped God in the temple. He is remembering that he had a relationship with God. He remembers his faith. Even though Jonah is not entirely safe at this point, being still in the belly of a big fish, he feels safe because he has faith, he knows he is in God's hands and he gives thanks that God is bringing him up from the Pit

But there is something funny going on in this prayer. Something odd about some lines in the prayer, and something odd about what is missing from the prayer.

Jonah says, "Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty but I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I vowed I will pay!" Here is Jonah, who has been disobedient to God, who has run away from God talking about those idolators over there, pointing out their sin. He contrasts them with himself, saying, "I am giving thanks, I sacrifice, I make vows." There are those people BUT then there's me. I am not like THOSE people over there.

Jonah isn't lying. He has not committed idolatry. That is one thing that Jonah hasn't done. He ran away from God, and avoided his calling, but he never prayed or sacrificed or made vows to other gods.

What makes this prayer even more odd is that just a few paragraphs earlier we met people who were worshipping false gods/idols and when confronted with the word of God by Jonah himself they turned away from their idols. They're the ones who prayed and made vows and sacrifices to God. It was these "idolators" who tried to save Jonah's life at the risk of their own lives. Jonah is very quick to point out their sin, while avoiding his own.

And that is what is not in this prayer. There is no evidence in this prayer that Jonah has repented. He does not say, "I made a mistake." He does not say, "I sinned, I'm sorry for running away." He does not say, "Forgive me for disobeying you." And he does not say, "I'm on my way to Nineveh now!"

You just wish he would have heard Rudy Wiebe's sermon from before Christmas, where Rudy was talking about the usefulness of the prayer, "Lord have mercy to me a sinner." There is a lot lacking in Jonah's prayer, and yet he ends with a resounding song of praise: "Deliverance belongs to God"

Jonah's prayer is not a perfect prayer—it's a prayer in a tight spot. It's a prayer that is not gracious to those around him. It's not filled with insight into his own life but he does get a few things right. He's right about talking to God, about sharing his thoughts with God and he says, "Deliverance belongs to God" Indeed it does!

Can we find ourselves in this picture of Jonah? I wonder about the prayers we've said. Have we always been able to acknowledge our own guilt our own responsibility? Are we as repentant as we should be before God or even in prayer do we try to shift the blame to others?

"Thank you God for saving me from that car accident BUT I had a good reason for speeding, and the city of Edmonton just doesn't clear the roads very well!" Instead of, "I was speeding, I didn't shoulder check, you saved me from the consequences of my own mistakes...thank you."

"Thank you God that I didn't get caught cheating on that test but that prof always gives tests that are unfair, and I was busy at church all weekend so I couldn't study." Instead of, "I deserved to get kicked out of school for cheating, in your mercy, I am given another chance, and I don't deserve it."

"Thank you God that my partner forgave me and my marriage isn't over but they are so hard to live with and I could have done a lot worse but I only did what I did." Instead of, "I was unfaithful, I sinned, I don't deserve to be pardoned, thank you for saving this relationship." Like Jonah, we pray imperfect prayers when we've been down.



For me one of the most powerful pictures I have seen of the story of Jonah is this one, by the wonderful contemporary artist He Qi. He's from China but now lives in Minnesota, and if you have a chance, check out his fabulous website of religious art. (www.heqiart.com) The artist chooses an interesting part of the story to illustrate. Jonah is still sleeping in the boat. But notice that there is already a fish hovering below with open mouth to catch Jonah who will soon be thrown overboard. What totally catches me in this painting is the way He Qi has depicted the sea that is all around the boat. The sea is personified. I think the sea takes on the image of God, surrounding Jonah and the sailors. No matter where they go, they will find

God. God is in an attitude of prayer, head bowed, hands together. Jonah should be the one who is praying but he is fast asleep and oblivious. It is God in a posture of prayer, longing to save Jonah and Nineveh. It's a very nurturing image, a loving image of God.

I like that image because I think it fits the story. We read here that God saves Jonah from drowning before Jonah has prayed anything. Even once Jonah is in the big fish, God doesn't wait for perfect repentance or the perfect prayer. God is satisfied that prayer is happening. God is satisfied with a baby step towards righteousness.

We are not perfect people. We are downwardly mobile. We head towards Tarshish, we sleep through the storm, we obstinately refuse to pray but God saves us even when we can't or don't pray, even when we don't deserve it. God appreciates even our baby steps towards righteousness. God offers grace.

How would we paint a picture of this story? Would we give Jonah our own face? Are we willing to talk to God from the Pit?

Or do we see anything of ourselves in the face of God here? Are we able to be loving and graceful, to love people even before they make baby steps in the right direction?

Go into your week, surrounded by the love of God, the matchless grace of Jesus greater than the mighty rolling sea!