

June 17, 2012
First Baptist Vancouver
Praying from the Belly of the Great Fish
Text: Jonah 1:17-2:10
(Series: “Feeling for the City what God Feels for the City”)
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“We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond)”. It is who we say we are as a Church; whose gathering place, the Sanctuary, is located in the downtown core of one of the greatest cities in the world.

“We are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city (and beyond)”.

Following Jesus. Not just reading about, not just thinking about, not just singing songs about, but following. As we sang this morning and last Sunday morning:

“Where You go, I’ll go;
Where you stay, I’ll stay;
When You move, I’ll move.
I will follow You.
Whom You love, I’ll love;
How You serve, I’ll serve;
If this life I lose,
I will follow You.”

“We are a community following Jesus...” getting in line behind Jesus...staying close to Jesus, right on His heels...”with a heart for the city (and beyond)”

“With a heart for the city...”

As I suggested last Sunday, I think we need to make a small adjustment in our identity and mission statement, a small adjustment with huge implications. I think we need to change the article “a” to the adjective “His”. To change “a heart for the city” to “His heart for the city”...Jesus’ heart for the city, the Incarnate God’s heart for the city, the God-Man’s heart for the city. “We are a community following Jesus - the Living God come down in our flesh and blood – with His heart for the city (and beyond).”

And nowhere else in Scripture is His heart for the city more clearly revealed than in the Old Testament book of Jonah. The story of Jonah – a “fishy” story, easily dismissed as a metaphorical tale – is a story about God. As all the books of the Bible finally are! More specifically, the story of Jonah is a story about God’s heart.

Even more specifically, the story of Jonah is a story about God’s feelings...feelings for others, especially for the 7th Century before Christ city of Nineveh, a city which God Himself calls “the great city” twice in the book. In God’s initial call (Jonah 1:1): “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city...” and in God’s reiteration of the call (Jonah 3:1): “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city”.

Great in what sense? Architecturally? Technologically? Intellectually? Culturally? Yes. But “great” as “great to God”. “Great” as much on God’s radar screen. Jonah 3:3 - “Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city”, or, “A very important city”. Literally, ”a great city to God”, an important city to God, filled with human beings – 120,000 according to God’s count – created in the image of the Creator creating a magnificent city. The story of Jonah is the story about what the Living God feels for that city.

You see, all was not well in Nineveh...as is the case in every city, however great. We know that during Jonah’s time Nineveh experienced significant social unrest. A famine was spreading. Floods rose, contaminating water supplies. There was growing immorality and corruption, and injustice and violence. An earthquake had recently occurred, shaking people’s sense of the world. The monarchy was on shaky ground. (Douglas Stuart, 492)

Jonah 1:1 “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it because its wickedness has come up to Me.” As I pointed out last Sunday, “wickedness” is only one possible meaning of the Hebrew word God uses. A number of scholars now realize that the primary meaning of the word is “trouble”. “Arise, go to Nineveh and preach against it because its trouble has come up to Me”. God cares for the city because the city is in trouble. For all its magnificence, Nineveh was in trouble. God feels for the city because the city is experiencing trouble.

Jonah 4:11 “120,000 people who do not know the difference between their right and left hand...” 120,000 people who do not know right from wrong. Not hard to imagine, is it? And as consequence, in trouble, in difficulty, is misery. Having left the Living God out of the equation, having rejected God’s ways as old fashioned, the city was in trouble. And that troubles God. God does not want to see cities in trouble. God feels for cities in trouble.

And the book of Jonah is all about God’s feelings, and all about God wanting to bring His people in His heart for the city. All about God getting His people to feel for the city what He feels for the city.

Which is what Jonah the disciple, Jonah the prophet, does not want to do! Jonah does not want to feel for the city what his God feels for the city. Jonah the Jewish prophet does not want to feel what God feels for Nineveh. Nineveh is a Gentile city, the leading city of the Assyrian Empire which has inflicted, and wants to inflict, horror on Jonah’s people, the northern tribes of Israel. The God of the Jews feels for the trouble, the misery, of the enemy Gentile city. And Jonah does not want to feel what God feels.

So Jonah runs...in the opposite direction. Jonah is in Jerusalem. Nineveh is east of Jerusalem. Jonah heads west...in exactly the other direction! Know anyone like that?

As we saw last Sunday, in chapter one of the book, it does not work. For it cannot work. No human being can do what Jonah tries to do – “flee the presence of Yahweh”. It is not possible. Jonah knows Psalm 139.

“Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Where can I flee from Your presence (literally, Your Face).
If I ascend to heaven, You are there.
If I make my bed in Sheol (*the silent deep*), behold You are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn (*travel at the speed of light*),
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your right hand will lead me
And Your right hand will take hold of me.”

Which is what we see God doing in the second chapter of Jonah. The sailors on the ship heading in the opposite direction from Ninevah have, in their minds, no choice but to throw Jonah overboard into the sea. They did not want to have to do it. But they concluded that Jonah had angered his god, and that the storm on the sea threatening to destroy them was due to Jonah’s disobedience, to Jonah’s sheol. Jonah does not argue with their conclusion. Jonah 1:12 – “for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you”. Reluctantly the sailors throw the prophet overboard into the sea.

Down he goes...continuing the movement he began when he started to run from God. Down. Down. Down to Joppa to get a ride to Nineveh. Down into the hold of the ship to sleep away the consciousness of God. Down into denial of the reality he knew. And down into the sea...way down...all the way down.

“But even there Your right hand will take hold of me.” In His great mercy, God rescues the disobedient and downward descending prophet. God sends – appoints, provides – a great fish – “great city”, “great fish” – to come and swallow Jonah, and thereby save him from certain death.

It is then that Jonah prays, on his way down, and into the belly of the great fish. Jonah finally prays. Jonah 2:2 – “I called out of my distress to the Lord, to Yahweh”. When on board the ship the Gentile sailors called on their gods, the Jewish prophet did not...did not call on his God. The captain of the ship called on Jonah to call on his god, on Yahweh. Jonah did not. He was not happy with his God, because of God’s feelings for the city Jonah wants to see destroyed. While all the other passengers on the storm-tossed ship were calling on their gods – whom Jonah knows were but idols, projections of human imagination (2:8) – Jonah did not call on his God, whom he himself confirmed to be: “God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9).

But then he began to experience more fully the inherent consequences of his sin; when he began going down, down, down, Jonah finally prays. And God hears Jonah’s prayer, and acts on Jonah’s behalf, and, by extension, on behalf of the city whose “troubles” have “come up” before Him.

Jonah prays from the belly of the great fish.

Let us dwell in and explore his prayer. Let us do so in two phases. First: the God to whom Jonah prays; second: the prayer Jonah prays to this God.

A) The God to whom Jonah prays is the God who feels, especially for people in trouble; and the God who is able to do something for people in trouble.

1) The God who feels. As I said last Sunday, I am using the word intentionally: feels...emotion...deep emotion.

We meet this fact about the Living God in the early chapters of the Grand Story the Bible tells. Israel is in Egypt suffering under the injustice and cruelty of the great Pharaoh. God meets Moses, who would become Israel's greatest leader, in the desert at a burning bush. And Moses hears words which would forever change his perspective on life.

Exodus 3:7-8

“I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob...I have surely seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have *heard* their crying out because of their slave drivers. And I know their suffering. So I have *come down* to rescue them...”

The Living God is the God who sees. He sees our misery, He sees our trouble. The Living God is the God who hears. He hears our cries for deliverance from our trouble. The Living God is the God who knows. “I know their suffering”. The Hebrew word is *yada*. It is a knowing that is more than cognitive. It is the word used to describe the deep, intimate knowing between a husband and wife in sexual union. *Yada* involves an intimate knowing which is cognitive and visceral, mental and emotional. “I know their suffering”, I feel it.

This truth is what separates the Judeo-Christian God from all other gods of all other faiths. God feels.

Most religions offer four attributes of God. God is infinite, God is incomprehensible, God is indivisible, and God is impassible – or, as the Greeks put it, a-pathetic, non-feeling. For the Greeks, God, if God is to be truly God, cannot be affected by something outside God. God cannot be moved by something outside Himself, for, in the Greek mind, that would imply that God can be controlled by external reality. Therefore, God must not feel. God cannot experience emotions, whether pleasant or painful. Which means God does not suffer. The Divine One is impassible, a-pathetic, non-passionate, unfeeling. This is the view held by most religions and philosophers. Thus, when our Muslim friends suffer, they suffer for Allah, but never with Allah.

This view has also permeated the thinking of the Christian Church. From the 20th Century to the 19th Century, the impassibility of God, the “a-pathetic” of God, was a tenet or orthodoxy. The Living God cannot be moved by the realities of life – troubles – and still be Divine. Oh, the Church theologians proclaimed the love of God for a broken world. But the love was an attribute, not a feeling. To say that God has the capacity to feel for/with others implied God could be controlled by realities outside God's self.

It was the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, who suffered the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, who has led the Church into a more biblical understanding of God. Moltmann argues that the Church's theologians “made the mistake of recognizing only

two alternatives: either God's essential incapacity for suffering or God's being subject to suffering if God did suffer." Multmann argues there is a third alternative, namely "the voluntary laying oneself open to another and allowing oneself to be intimately affected by the other." ("The Trinity and the Kingdom", 23)

At the burning bush, Israel discovers what Israel could never deduce. The Living God chooses to be intimately affected by others. God chooses to open God's self up to the pain of the world; God is infinite; God is incomprehensible; God is indivisible, but not impassible, not a-pathetic. "I have seen...I have heard...and I know my people's suffering. I feel with my people."

And then..."I have come down to rescue My people." I have seen...I have heard...I feel...and come down..." All the way down is Jesus of Nazareth who feels our trouble. ["Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus."] That is the God to whom Jonah prays as Jonah goes down, down, down. The God who also goes down, down, down.

2) And able. The God to whom Jonah prays is able, able to do something in the face of trouble. Which is what is being affirmed in God sending the great fish. The part of the story that is the hardest to believe...except, perhaps, the part we read in the third chapter when the whole city of Nineveh repents.... A great fish? Swallowing a man? Enabling him to stay alive in the sea three days and three nights? Really? Martin Luther: "This narrative seems almost unbelievable, yea, sounds like a greater falsehood and folly than any fable of the poets. If it were not recorded in Scripture, I would regard it as a ridiculous lie."

What are we to do...in our time...with this part of the story? Some have done research about other, non-biblical big-fish stories. Other men have been swallowed by whales and lived through the experience, albeit quite shaken, never quite the same again. Such stories help us realize that, as amazing as the Jonah story is, is it at least, not totally absurd.

But I think that fact misses the point. I know the idea of God sending a great fish to rescue Jonah is, on some scientific presupposition, unbelievable, incredible. But then so is most of the Grand Story!!!

Where does the story begin? Before the burning bush? Where does the story begin? With God, and with nothing else...God and nothing. And what happens? Out of the nothing God brings into being something! Something? All this grand creation we enjoy! God...nothing. Out of nothing...God brings into being seas and dry land...the sun and moon and stars – billions upon billions of them! - and birds and animals...and humans, you and me and all the people of this great city. Out of nothing!

And the story continues on the same note. Things happen that no one expects to happen. The Red Sea is parted...and millions of former slaves walk across on dry land. In the desert water flows out of a rock. For 40 years mana covers the ground every morning...and quail come every night. On it goes.

Until the part of the story when the God who feels literally comes down, in and as Jesus of Nazareth. Conceived in a virgin's womb. Touches blind eyes and makes them see. Turns water into wine. Takes five loaves of bread and two fish... multiplies them to feed 5,000 people! Frees people from unseen demonic powers. Raises the dead! On it goes.

Until we come to the heart of the Good Story. Jesus is crucified...laid in a tomb...dead. But on Sunday morning the tomb is empty! And He is alive!

Take the so-called "supernatural" element out of the Grand Story and it is no longer Grand. In fact, take the so-called "supernatural" element out of the story and the story collapses. It is not even a good morality play...for the lead character would have died defeated.

The God to whom Jonah prays is able: able to do what no one thinks can be done, able to do what no one expects to be done. Jesus would later point to the Jonah story, and especially to the "in the belly of the great fish" part, as a sign, a sign pointing to Himself. Jesus seems to see the great fish in the same light as His resurrection. God doing what no one thinks can be done! The God who feels for people in trouble is able to do something for people in trouble. That is the point of the "fishy" part of the story. That is the God to whom Jonah prays!

B) And what does he pray?

1) A beautiful, poetic, hymn-like prayer. On his way down into the sea? In the belly of the great fish? For many people Jonah's prayer is also problematic. They find it difficult – improbable – that an about-to-be-drowned man could pray such a prayer. Some even suggest we could edit out the prayer and the story would flow without it.

I hear the concerns. But praying the way Jonah prays is actually not all that difficult to understand. For Jonah was steeped in the Prayer Book of Israel, in the Psalms. As a good Jew, he would have grown up praying the Psalms His parents would have trained Jonah to pray by praying the Psalms. Even more to the point, as a prophet of Israel he would have been steeped in the Psalms.

I recently learned that the prophets of Israel were expected to be able to pray the Psalms; indeed, they were expected to compose Psalms, hymns of lament and theology and praises. Which is why the works of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah and Amos are full of Psalm-like prayers and songs.

In a crisis, in times of trouble, we pray what our minds and hearts have been trained to pray. Down in the depths...way down in the depths...in the sea...in the swirling chaos...in a hospital room...we pray what we have been trained to pray. Even if it is only:

“Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

Jonah prays the way he does - in this poetic, hymn-like way – because he was trained to pray the Psalms.

If you know the Psalm-prayers you know they are saturated, so to speak, with images of falling down into watery chaos As one scholar puts it: the Psalms are “brimming with water imagery”, the Psalms are “aquatic” prayers. (Bryan D. Estella, 81)

Psalm 69 –

“Save me, O Yahweh, for the waters have come up to my neck.” (I can feel that line!)

“I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.” (69:1-2)

“Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink.” (I have prayed that line more than once!)

“Deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit closes its mouth over me.” (69:14-15)

“Answer me quickly for I am in trouble.”(69:17)

Having grown up praying such prayers Jonah had at his disposal just the right words and images to say...even as he was on his way down, down, down.

2) His prayer follows the pattern of many of the Psalms.

- *He names the trouble.*
- *He cries out in the trouble.*
- *God hears him in the trouble and acts to save him.*
- *He then gives thanks for such mercy and grace in trouble.*

He names the trouble:

I was sinking deeper and deeper. “You hurled me into the sea.” (2:3) The sailors had, but Jonah knows that behind the action of the sailors was the action of God. And Jonah knows he deserved to be “hurled into the sea”.

“Into the very heart of the seas.” (2:3)

“The currents swirled around me.” (2:3)

“All Your waves and breakers swept over me.” (2:3)

“The deep surrounded me Seaweed wrapped around my head.” (2:5)

He feels the consequences of trying to run.

Jonah 2:4 –

- “I have been banished from Your sight.” At least, that is what he thinks to be the case. It is what he had wanted and why he bought a ticket from Nineveh.

- “I sank to the roots of the mountains”. Way, way down.

- “The earth beneath barred me in forever.” He sees himself headed for what the ancient near-Easterner thought of as the “underworld”. Way, way down. He then felt on the verge of Sheol, the place of the dead.

Another Old Testament scholar expresses Jonah's trouble:

"Having attempted earlier to flee for Tarshish from God's presence, he now finds himself destined for Sheol, where he will be permanently isolated from God."

(Desmond Alexander, 126)

Jonah names the full extent of his trouble.

And then *he cries out to God* (Jonah 2:2 –

"In my distress I called out to Yahweh." It is that Yahweh who invites us to "call on My Name". Some of us can remember the song:

"You just call out my name,
and you know wherever I am,
I'll come running
to see you again."

Yahweh loves to hear us call His Name!

Jonah 2:3 –

"I have been banished from Your sight yet I look again toward Your holy Temple." He knows that all we have to do when we are suffering the consequences of sin is to look...look to God. And in light of God's having "come down" we see there...in the Temple...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Jonah 2:7 –

"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered You, Yahweh..." I called to You!
"Yahweh...I am drowning!"

And *God heard him!*

Jonah 2:2 – "He answered me."

2:2- "You listened to my cry."

2:7 – "My prayer rose to You" ...just as Nineveh's trouble had risen to God.

2:6 – "You brought me up from the pit, from Sheol."

"O Yahweh my God." My God. Jonah is coming home, back to the Covenant. "I will be Your God and you shall be my people."

"O Yahweh my God, You brought me up from Sheol." You did not let me suffer the full extent of the inherent consequences of sin! Jonah experiences what God wants to do for Nineveh. Jonah is rescued from the inherent troubles caused by simple choices!

Jonah names the trouble. Jonah cries out in the trouble. God hears Jonah in the trouble, and acts to save.

And then, following the pattern of many Psalms, Jonah *gives thanks for God's mercy.*

Jonah 2:9 – "I will sacrifice to You..." A sacrifice of thanksgiving, while still in the belly of the great fish! For as awful as it would be to be in the belly of the fish, he realizes the fish has been sent to save him. And Jonah re-affirms his commitment:

Jonah 2:9 – "that I have vowed I will make good."

As a disciple, as a follower, as a prophet, long ago he had said to God, "I will go where You want me to go to do what You want me to do." It is what we as disciples, as

followers, have said in our baptisms and on other occasions: “I will go where you want me to go, to do what You want me to do”.

Jonah still does not want Ninevah to experience the mercy and grace of God. Even after experiencing it for himself! But at least he is willing to keep his vow. Jonah will sing with us:

“Where You go, I’ll go;
Where you stay, I’ll stay;
When You move, I’ll move.
I will follow You.
Whom You love, I’ll love...”

That he is not yet ready to sing. But he made a promise to obey, and renews his vow. And then gathers all his praying around the great declaration, Jonah 2:10 – “Salvation comes from the cross; salvation is from Yahweh”. Because that is what the name Yahweh is all about...salvation. Yahweh is salvation. That is, after all, the Saviour’s name. Jesus, Y’shua, Yahweh saves.

Because the God to whom Jonah prays
is the God who *feels*, God hears Jonah’s prayer.

Because the God to whom Jonah prays
is the God who is *able*, God *acts* to save Jonah.

Because the Living God – “the God of heaven under the seas and the dry land” – feels for people in trouble,

He *hears* our cry in trouble.

Because the Living God – “the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land” – is able, He comes into our trouble and works in ways we could never have imagined, like sending a great fish. And like raising the crucified Jesus from the grave.