

Prayer from the Depths

Jonah 2:1-10

This passage of scripture is a light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. I've never been one for going into caves or underground passages... It may have something to do with playing sleeping bag games with my brothers when one - most likely our Jon, would dare me to go in head first and then sit on the end... I probably did the same to him to be fair, but the upshot was that while he remained confident then, I became a scaredy cat! So I don't do potholing or like going down into a dark underground situation of any sort - I 'bravely' managed to do some very pedestrian and upright caves in the Yorkshire Dales, but freaked out when we had to bend over slightly... You can pray for deliverance from all this for me at your leisure - the point being I don't like it and start to panic when I can't see a way out, or can't see how to get to the exit...

Confessional over! All the men in my household are really brave and tough and think I'm irrational - but you know what? Other people's stress points and dark moments don't often make sense to us when we don't live in their skin, we don't know what darkness it is that overwhelms them.

Living through the COVID-19 quarantine may have felt like a bottomless abyss to some people ... I don't want to describe it, because if that is you, we love you and are praying for light to break through... the darkness doesn't need to be drawn in for people to step into...

We look at Jonah, and see him on the run from God, refusing to go to the "great City of Ninevah" (1:2). He heard God's call and fled in the opposite direction. Now, I have a lot to say about people fleeing from calling and their outright disobedience to God. Jonah's disobedience was short lived, but when people tell me they ran away from a call to ministry for decades, I do wonder whether the church needs leaders who can laughingly or fondly talk of their disobedience in that way? If they will do it once, will they run from God again when the pressure hits? Just something to mull on - God does teach people, as we see in this story - but that outright repentance for disobedience that demonstrates lesson learned is so important in our Christian Leaders.

Everywhere that Jonah went while running away, the judgement of God followed him. The people around him suffered because God was angry at Jonah's disobedience. The disobedience caused the storm. Now, today it's not the done thing to talk about God's anger - and in many ways, the liberal academic theologians have set about to neuter God so that he is powerless and ineffectual, devoid of response.

But the book of Jonah is no mere tale spun for the telling around a campfire - it is carefully developed into two parallel parts - the first two chapters and the second two in which each begins with God's Word Coming to Jonah and the message he gives Jonah to tell followed by Jonah's response.

The second section in each parallel part is what happens out in the world - here Jonah has found himself in the middle of a storm which swirls around him that even the

non-Jewish and the very type of people to whom Jonah was to deliver God's word to recognised that the issue causing the storm in their environment was to do with offence against god. Jonah's response in comparison is poor - in our part of the story he was sleeping while the people who didn't know Yahweh were struggling against the storm and praying to their own gods without effect.

The third part in each parallel is that God will teach Jonah grace and faith - in our section we see this teaching in the rescue by the fish.

It is good to see that here, in this tiny scriptural story there is a message from God that takes the message of God's desire for salvation out by his own prophet to the parts of the world that may even have been considered as 'enemy' by the Jewish people. Jonah did not want to go - he was happy in the bubble of his own religious and cultural world view but God wanted to show him the bigger picture of God's love and care for all people and to engage him in issues that didn't revolve directly around Jonah. Even in the middle of crisis on the boat last the lot fell on him, Jonah learned that the people around him were treating him fairly and humanely - they had no desire to see him perish. Jonah had to come to the point of throwing himself literally on the mercy of God and to give up his own life before peace would be restored. We could see some parallels to Jesus' teaching here. It is on Jonah's journey to discovering the measure of God's grace that he must die to self and discover that his needs are met in God.

So this is where we find him - swallowed up by that which God provided to catch him as he fell. I like that it is a giant fish - a nice picture here of some huge cod or a nice fat sea salmon that provided a life boat as Jonah was thrown overboard. I'm not a huge fan of fish - but here its is certainly a blessing... as it saved him in the middle of drowning, as the waters overwhelmed Jonah and he sank down in the newly calm waters - "to the roots of the mountains" as Jonah would describe it. How low could he go? So low that a deep sea fish swallowed him. Our rescue, our answer to prayer will often come when our very world has bottomed out and we throw ourselves into the ocean of God's mercy - the prayer may well be answered in unexpected ways and we still may not see that it is God answering our prayer, because even though it is happening we have work to do to find our feet in faith again.

I'm a bit reminded of the infernal Sprowston heron at this point. Always winding up the residents of Sprowston by stealing their fish from the ponds and arrogantly swooping in to take that which belongs to other people. My friends in Manchester have a pond and the Flixton Heron will come and terrify their fishies, but there is one huge mega fish that protects them. The heron can't get him and the little ones know they can hide behind big fishy until the danger is past. The big fish will be a place of refuge for Jonah, but he is some place where he has no control and no freedom, he is held in the 'belly of the fish' until he sorts himself out and gets to grips with God.

It is hard to want to pray when, to quote Jonah himself "the waves and breakers swept over me and the deep surrounded me and seaweed was wrapped around my

head.” And this is where the passage teaches us about the grace of God that must break in if we are going to recover at all.

Jonah would not recover his calling as a prophet if he continued to run from God’s word. Maybe there is a message also to the church here too - will we recover if we continue to run from God’s word? The missional message that Jonah didn’t want to share must be spoken - to people whom Jonah didn’t believe warranted God’s salvation. It looks like Jonah had made God in his image rather than allowing God to mould him in the image of God. So many of us have tried to make God fit our mould and been deeply disappointed when God continued to be God - making a way of redemption for our enemies and not simply blessing the lovely Christians. We belong to one world and we are all part of the consequences of sin or of obedience. The Covid which has inhibited us for all these months has not chosen ‘only bad people’ to affect - there has been a mix of the whole of society affected.

Jonah had to come to a point of recognising his own futility here. He was not the author of God, but he could let God be his author and write his story. There’s a kid’s song - which I’ll link on the worship list - that says; “Jesus is the mighty mighty king, God made us, he’s the boss of everything and Jesus is the mighty mighty king. Catherine is not the boss, uh huh- Boris is not the boss, uh huh, Jonah is not the boss, uh huh, Jesus is the boss.....” (It’s a Colin Buchanan classic!!) To be clear - Boris now, Theresa, David or Gordon or Tony - Donald, Barak, George... Not the boss - Jesus is the boss....

When we throw ourselves back into the arms of mercy we can begin our recovery. Let God be God and be willing to serve. Even when we make that decision from the depths.

And it is from the depths that Jonah must recognise God. His focus on his sinking, his seaweed - nasty slidey stuff, the overwhelming fact of waves crashing over him and the being brought so low that the very roots of the mountains are evident to him - all this focus on the peril and trouble obscures the light of the promise - the covenant promise of God that he will be our God if we will be his people... And here, being is an attitude and intention. Are you a Christian? Yeah, that’s what I’d put on a form - well, maybe not Christian, maybe Methodist or Brethren or Baptist - even Anglican or non-denom. So what does that mean? Well my family have always been one, I was Christened one, I taught Sunday school at one back in the day. But what does that mean now? Well, I don’t know... it’s like an insurance policy, I’ll keep writing it on my form and then if anything goes wrong, they’ll know where I belong...

Jonah was a prophet of Israel, speaking the word of God. He had a current and active faith, but when he looked inside himself, he judged God’s judgement as not as good as his own so he went off... Arrogant in his self-sufficiency and scared to go where God sent, the results were that he needed to find the Lord again and not be a nominal prophet like we must not be. Nominal Christians - writing it on a form but not living it in our lives. In verse 7 of Chapter 2, there is a pivot as we see light break in... “When my life

was ebbing away, I remembered you Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.” Jonah’s eyes return to the one who is capable of saving and is trustworthy in answering and he offers his prayer of praise.

Prayer is a journey of return to God. Constantly. When everything has gone wrong and when despair and failure overwhelm - when the sense of “What?” Is too big to comprehend, to find the crack of light at the end of the tunnel that lets in the waft of God’s presence and allow your love for him to fuel your praises in the depths - then as we begin to declare once again the goodness of God - salvation enters in. Salvation that is God’s to dispense and ours to proclaim, to the ends of the earth as Jesus would say - for Jonah, it would be Nineveh, and God would need to repeat the lesson again.

Once Jonah declares that God is God and not him, the fish spews him up onto dry land. I’m sorry to mention vomit before lunch - or as you’re eating your tea or enjoying a pink wafer biscuit, but this violent expulsion from fish guts to freedom is where life begins. It reminds us that the grave could not hold Jesus and your present situation does not own you... There will be a glimmer of light in the place of despair, darkness or imprisonment. Fix your eyes on it and allow Jesus to break through the darkness with salvation. The situation is not the boss, uh uh, Jesus is the boss. And he loves you!

Salvation comes from the Lord. As missionary people, as praying people, as people who are called to change the atmosphere of the world so that it looks like God’s world, where people who need to know God, get to know God. Where people have their lives turned around by God’s unfailing mercy and love. Where the church is taught by society to do better like Jonah was taught by his heathen boat mates that the answer lay in God - we fix our eyes on God and, even from the depths, as we declare him God, salvation enters in even when we are: Way Down in the middle of the Ocean.