

WGUMC August 12, 2012 Jonah 1:17-2:10

My guru Parker Palmer tells a story about when he was in his 40's and signed up for an outdoor leadership program called Outward Bound. The instructor put a harness and a rope around him and backed him up to a 110-foot cliff. Then she told him that all he had to do was lean way out over the void and walk down the face of that cliff. At first, he wouldn't lean out. He wanted to grab the cliff and cling to it so his feet kept losing their grip on the rock.

He was finally starting to get the hang of it, when halfway down, he came to a large hole in the rock, and he froze. The instructor waited a long time for him to thaw out. When he wasn't showing any signs of life, she called out, "Parker, is there anything wrong?" He responded in a voice that sounded more like it was coming from a 4-year-old than a 40-year-old, "I don't want to talk about it." The instructor, evidently having seen this behavior before, said cheerfully, "Then maybe it's

time you learn the Outward Bound motto: 'If you can't get out of it, get into it.'" [*The Active Life*, 33]

A lot of us get to a point in our lives when we feel stuck, frozen, can't go forward, can't go back. And we somehow know that we're going to have to dive much deeper into the hole before we can get ourselves out of it. Like the old song, "So high, can't get over it. So low, you can't get under it. So wide, can't get around it. You must go in at the door."

I think that's exactly where Jonah is today. Remember Jonah from last week? God had called him to do something he didn't want to do. So, he ran away from God and jumped into a boat that got caught up in a storm on account of Jonah's disobedience. And when sailors found him out, he told them to throw him overboard to calm the seas. If you can't get out of it, get into it. So, down, down Jonah went into the deep-sea darkness. He was really getting into the dark place in his soul when the Lord sent a large fish to swallow him up. And Jonah

was there in the belly of the beast for three days and three nights.

I'm not going to dwell on the plausibility of this story, because there is too much truth in it. Every one of us knows the monsters that lurk in the deeps of our lives. And we've probably felt swallowed up by them a time or two. We don't want to think about the prospect that God has provided that monster to us for the purpose of saving us. But that's what's going on in this story. For the first time since he heard the call of God to go to Nineveh and preach to that wicked people, Jonah has the chance to sit still and really think about it. He can't run away anymore. He can't even swim away. He can't do anything but pray.

For too many of us, praying is always a last resort, when we can't run anymore. And occasionally, we all need God to put us in a place where we can't do much else but pray. I have to show up for jury duty next month, and I'm planning on getting

a lot of praying done! Got me to thinking: If evading the call of God were a crime, we could be put in jail. By doing time, we'd have time to pray about that call. But we can't all be so lucky!

Running from God isn't exactly a crime, but it can be very hazardous to your health. I know a woman who knew she needed to quit smoking. I was her pastor and I told her so. Isn't that as good as God telling her so?! But she figured she didn't have the willpower to do it. So she just smoked and coughed away, until a serious case of pneumonia sent her to the hospital. She was very ill and hospitalized for days. She didn't want any visitors. She warned them all away, so she had lots of time to pray. And in that time she determined that she was done smoking for good. Cold turkey. Not only did she never smoke again, but she wasn't even tempted to. So you see, a hospital bed can serve as the belly of the beast, if need be.

Now, do I believe that God sent her to that hospital? No, I believe her smoking did. But even if God doesn't send the big

fish to swallow us, God certainly uses the fish to reach out to us. What we think is killing us is sometimes the very thing that is saving us. Another example: chemotherapy. There's a beast if there ever was one. But the beast isn't so bad if it's killing the cancer that threatens to kill you.

The problem is that at the time we don't know if the beast is saving us or killing us. Jonah didn't know, and yet from the belly of the fish, he prayed a prayer of thanksgiving. He thanked God for the deliverance he could not yet see. And here's the moral of the story.

Jonah seems to be whistling in the dark when he sits in the belly of the fish and prays: "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and God answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice...The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me...As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you..." And the prayer ends, "I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to

you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

How do you thank God for something that hasn't happened yet? Isn't that counting chickens before they hatch? In a way. Think of a pregnancy. A mother thanks God for the life growing inside of her even though it's a long time before her due date, even though she has no idea how the pregnancy is going to go or how motherhood is going to feel. She's simply grateful for the future, for the potential of new life and the chance to be a part of it.

Think of your deliverance as the child growing in you. Salvation is the new life waiting to be born in you. And you can thank God for it now because, even though you're still waiting for it, just the anticipation of it has already changed you. You are no longer dwelling on past mistakes, but looking forward to a future promise. You are no longer fixated on your present pain. You are being healed by the anticipation of its relief.

Christians have a word for it: we call it hope. Paul writes, "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see we wait for it with patience." [Romans 8:24-25] Whether you're looking for a physical healing or a spiritual one, whether you need an appointment with your own doctor or Jesus, the Great Physician, wait for it with patience. And then, like Jonah, give thanks for it.

Yes, give thanks for the deliverance about to be delivered to you. I promise you that if you give thanks for it in advance, it will become more and more real for you. You don't have to die to get to heaven. As Wesley used to say, believers live in eternity and walk in eternity. But also remember what Jonah says, "Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" So we don't get to schedule it. And we don't get to engineer it. It may not look to us like the salvation we're looking for. "Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." Better

translation: "vomited." So, Jonah's salvation did come to him, but it came in a pool of fish vomit.

Not unlike his first birth, Jonah's rebirth was a messy affair. Ours can be, too. I can tell you that it won't come at a convenient time. Jesus won't come when your house is clean, when all your affairs are in order. Jesus will get into your life when you can't get out of it. He'll come when you are drowning in it: when you get the pink slip, when you file the divorce papers, as you are recovering from surgery, sending the last kid off to college, putting a parent in a nursing home, or saying goodbye to a loved one. When you can't get out of it, Jesus will get into it! And when you least expect it, that's when you'll start to feel strange. Don't worry. Those strange feelings are simply the contractions of God's new creation. Before you know it, here you come down the rebirth canal. Pretty messy, but pretty amazing. That's grace. Thanks be to God.