

I heard an interview the other day with a communications expert about the evolution of communications devices over the past few years. One of the things that struck me was his observation that, since our cell phones now have GPS capabilities, we can be located no matter where we are. Is that good or bad? It's bad if you're a conspiracy buff. Now the Antichrist can find you wherever you are. But it's good if you're a parent...or a shopaholic. Now you can be walking past a store and because of your location you get a text that says, "We're having a sale at the Gap. Why not stop inside and get 20% off. We're located in the next block." Amazing isn't it? You never have to miss another sale.

Psalms 139 is a GPS Psalm, God's Positioning System. It reads in part, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?"⁸ If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.⁹ If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,¹⁰ Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me." **Psalms 139:7-10.**

At times, when we find ourselves in the belly of the beast, whether it be cancer, or divorce, or the loss of a loved one, our broken heart cries out, "Where are you Lord?" There are times when we turn our backs on God and run. Ps. 139 applies, "Where can I flee?"

Jonah ran. God had asked him to do something he didn't want to do. Jonah had plenty of reasons to run; fear of failure, fear of fairness, fear of the future. So he runs. "And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights." Jonah 1:17

This verse has been the source of a great debate. It's not the debate over whether a whale could swallow a man... Little girl told teacher and teacher said, "Couldn't happen." Little girl insisted and finally said, "When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah." Teacher said, "Well what if Jonah didn't go to heaven?" Little girl thought for a minute and then said, "Then you can ask him!"

The debate is not whether a fish can swallow a man (once you get past Genesis 1:1 the rest is easy) the debate is whether God sent the fish as a means of disciplining His disobedient servant or of saving him from certain drowning. The answer is "both." God, in His severe mercy, often sends us into the deep in order to save us. Jonah needed to experience the grace of God for himself before he would ever extend the grace of God to the people of Nineveh.

If you are in the belly of the beast, don't despair. There are some lessons that can only be learned at the University of Whales.

I. In the belly of the beast we come face to face with our true selves. In chapter 1 the author emphasizes Jonah going "down." He went down to Joppa (v.3), down into the stern of the ship (v.5) and finally down into the sea (v.15). In chapter 2, His own retelling of the story is summarized by "I sank down." 2:6. You can't get much lower than sinking to the bottom of the sea especially if you are a proud Jew. The sea was symbolic of chaos. In fact some day there will be no more sea. **Revelation 21:1**, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea." Jonah had literally sunk to the depths of despair and he no doubt felt he had been forsaken by God.

This underwater adventure seems to be standard operating procedure for the equipping of God's servants. That's why A. W. Tozer said, "God uses no man greatly until He hurts him deeply." For grapes to yield their fruit they must be crushed. Until we recognize that we are spiritually bankrupt we will feel no need for God. That's what Jesus was talking about when He said, "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom, blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted."

It is in the belly of the beast we come to our senses. Like the Prodigal Son he runs from the Father until he finds himself in a slimy stinking situation and realizes that life with God is a whole lot better than life without Him. Luke 15:17 says, "But when he came to himself..."

II. In the belly of the beast we remember God. "YOU cast me into the deep," Jonah says in verse 3. The issue for Jonah is not the pagan Ninevites, not the pagan sailors who tossed him overboard. The issue is his relationship with the God of the universe. He ran from "the face of God." (ch. 1) God's unwanted grace arouses Jonah from his spiritual lethargy and brings him face to face with the holiness and majesty of God. God is determined to draw Jonah to himself no matter what it takes.

The older we get, the longer we walk with God, the more convinced we become of fewer and fewer things. Eventually we discover that the most important thing in the world is the presence of God. Everything else is secondary. A year ago Susan Rothrock wasn't feeling well. I think they call it malaise. But Susan soon learned that the source of her malaise was pancreatic cancer. She knows the statistics. This kind of cancer is rarely stopped. The experimental chemo seems to be slowing the beast down a little but some days Susan feels so bad she says death would be a welcome relief. Still she fights the good fight. She has asked all the right questions; "What is God trying to teach me? What am I supposed to learn from this?" She doesn't have many answers but she does have a remarkable sense of clarity. When I was diagnosed, she says, "All pettiness went out the window. The superficial things like shopping went out the window. All the trivial things had to just go away. I've learned about what's really important, to get to the core of things, like forgiveness and love. A lot of people spend their whole life running away from what God wants them to do. Each day is precious and my prayer each day is that the Lord will show me how He wants to spend my day. I listen to God each day. I begin each day in prayer and then continue to have an open-ended conversation with God all day."

Jonah helps us remember Jesus. **Matthew 12:38-41** "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." ³⁹ But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; ⁴⁰ for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ "The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

Effective outreach requires courageous inreach. God's unwanted grace in Jonah's life produced a new awareness of God's ultimate purpose. **Jonah 2:8** ⁸ "Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness." (NIV) - "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.") God, in His severe mercy, deliberately and decisively interferes with the God-lust that puts us in the position of deciding who should be saved. Submission to the will of God is the only cure for the arrogance of insisting that the world should work our way. We get busy, we get distracted, we get fooled into believing there are more important things to pursue. But when we are in the belly of the beast instead of mindlessly pursuing abstractions like money or success, there is a new awareness of what is real. God intensity replaces self-absorption.

III. In the belly of the beast we return to the word of God. Jonah's prayer is not spontaneous self-expression. It is a set prayer. Vv. 4-7. Not a word of his prayer is original. Every phrase can be traced back to the Psalms. There is a remarkable similarity between Jonah's words and the words of the psalmist. Psalm 18; Ps. 40; Ps. 130; Ps. 139. He had been a good student in Psalms school. When you get into deep trouble the word of God stored in your heart will come back to you.

In v. 10 the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah on the dry land (because as everyone knows, you can't keep a good man down).

We all pass through the belly of the beast voluntarily or involuntarily. When you do, remember: God is good...all the time. In his latest book If God is Good, Randy Alcorn tells the story of the late Pastor James Montgomery Boice who, in May 2000, stood before his Philadelphia church and explained that he'd been diagnosed with liver cancer: "Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you're free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles--and He certainly can--is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they're rare by definition.... Above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. If you think of God glorifying Himself in history and you say, where in all of history has God most glorified Himself? He did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, and it wasn't by delivering Jesus from the cross, though He could have.... God is in charge. When things like this come into our lives, they are not accidental. It's not as if God somehow forgot what was going on, and something bad slipped by.... God is not only the one who is in charge; God is also good. Everything He does is good.... If God does something in your life, would you change it? If you'd change it, you'd make it worse. It wouldn't be as good" (p.14).

Confess this morning and leave your sins at the foot of the cross outside the auditorium. "Salvation is from the LORD." Jonah 2:10