

Holy Mackerel! -2

Last week we made it through the first three verses of Jonah. You might want to follow along in the pew Bible this morning on page 1437. Picking up where we left off last week at verse four, we read: (1:4) *Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.*⁵ *All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.* The sailors' first reaction is fear. Their second reaction is prayer. Their third reaction is to jettison cargo. It's been said, "Pray as if it all depended on God; act as if it all depended on you," and that seems to be just what they're doing. These "are realistic, pious, and peaceful men."¹ Apparently, this is a mixed crew from several nationalities and faiths, because each person took the responsibility of praying to his own god.

Continuing - *But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.*⁶ *The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god!"* The captain doesn't say "get up and help," but "get up and pray!"

Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish." The captain is also a pious man. The captain knows better than to think he can control or manipulate God. He says, "Maybe your God will help."

Verse seven - *Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.* They cast lots to seek indication of the divine will. It seems odd to us today. But this wasn't an unusual method in Biblical times. The followers of Jesus met after the resurrection and cast lots to see who would replace Judas as one of the twelve.

⁸ *So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"* So many questions! It makes sense. If we were in that predicament, we'd be demanding answers to a lot of questions, too.

⁹ *He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."* Jonah responds with a simple confession of faith. It's also an indictment of his actions. He says I worship - but telling God "No!" can hardly be defined as worship - the God of heaven who made the sea. Here I am, in a ship, out on God's own creation, the sea, beneath the heavens, God's realm as well, and I'm trying to escape from God. Put this way, it would be funny if it weren't so stupidly pathetic. It's impossible to escape from God. Jonah's own words declare this. Jonah's own words are an indictment against himself. Of course, before we wag our finger at Jonah, or laugh too hard at his being caught in his own words, we might want to think about how often we act like God is nowhere around, how we just assume that we're below God's divine radar screen, so to speak. Oh, we love to hear Paul's majestic hymn of praise about God in Romans 8:38. *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,*³⁹ *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* We're quick to find comfort in the ever-present love of God, but a lot slower to base our lives on the ever-present demands of living a life of faithful dedication and obedience.

There's something else to notice here. The sailors have been praying. They've been talking to their gods. So far, Jonah seems to only be able to talk about his God.

¹⁰ *This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)*¹¹ *The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"* What should we do, they ask? Jonah is an insider, a Hebrew, a member of the chosen people. He was told to go to outsiders, enemies, oppressors, and he refused. He has run away from being God's prophet to one group of outsiders, the people of Ninevah. Now, he's among other outsiders, and they're asking what they should do. Do you see all of the irony in this situation? Jonah knows the God of all creation, yet thinks he can run from God. Jonah has been asleep to the dangerous circumstances of the boat, but the crew and the captain have immediately turned to praying to their gods. Who is devout, and who is not?

¹ James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, Interpretation Series, p 142

¹² "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. These are peaceful men. They don't want to kill Jonah, even though he admits that the predicament that they're in - is his fault. So they try rowing toward land. It's this guy's fault that they're in great peril. They've thrown the cargo overboard. If they survive, there will still be financial ruin to face. And now, they're willing to risk wrecking the ship on the shore, rather than throw this turkey overboard! Have you ever noticed how quick we are to look for a scapegoat to blame things on? Yet, these peaceful and prayerful sailors are going to great lengths to avoid taking vengeance on someone who admits he is to blame for their predicament.

At last, Jonah seems to have some sort of change of heart. He was unwilling to go to any trouble for the heathens in Nineveh, but here he's willing to give up his life for these few heathens. Perhaps, it's partly that he figures it's better that he is the only one to die, rather than that all of them perish. But there may be something else going on here along with that. It's far easier to dismiss a whole faceless group of people, the Ninevites, than it is to be uncaring when one looks directly into the eyes of someone who is suffering greatly. It's easy to love the old neighbor next door - and not be bothered by cuts in programs for the elderly. It's easy to love our children and grandchildren - and vote against school bond issues. It's easy to love our spouses - but generally have a really low opinion of the opposite sex. It's easy to care about the individual - yet hate the group. It's not rational, but it must be easy, because we do it all the time.

¹⁴ Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased." Now, the ship's crew begs for mercy from God. It seems really odd that they refer to Jonah as this "innocent man." They aren't quick to place blame. The lot has fallen on Jonah, to be sure, but they also recognize that they haven't personally seen him commit any evil. They aren't seeking vengeance - just deliverance. And they've come to recognize the sovereignty of God. They know their place before God. They say, "You, O Lord, have done as you pleased, despite our best efforts."

¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. The captain and the crew did not assume that their faith was sufficient and complete. Rather, they've been open to greater theological growth. As a result, the whole crew of the ship has become converts of the true God. They offer a sacrifice to God and make promises to God. It seems pretty obvious that their previous allegiances have been ineffective, but now they've found the creator of heaven and earth. Meanwhile, the disobedient Jonah has been thrown overboard to drown. He's gotten what he deserved for thumbing his nose at God. Dying by drowning is just and reasonable punishment for his sin of flagrant disobedience. So the story ends - with a terrible sinner getting the judgment and punishment he deserves - and with a batch of new converts. The best that can be said about Jonah is that he ended up being a missionary despite himself. Now judgment has been passed and he has been sentenced to death as he deserves. That's what we expect. That's a reasonable and righteous ending to the story.

¹⁷ But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. What's this? The story doesn't end with Jonah getting the punishment he deserves? There's a miracle! "Hallelujah!" we shout! Here is a miracle that proves God's power. And we go off and get distracted by whether it was a whale or a fish. Was it a whale or a holy mackerel or some other fish, but a holy fish of course, because it was provided by God? We celebrate the miracle of a fish swallowing Jonah - and how was it possible for Jonah to be swallowed whole?, and how could he breathe inside the fish?, and why didn't the digestive system of the fish digest Jonah? We live in a scientific age. We take biology in school and it's obvious right off to us that here is a biological miracle. We're so busy celebrating the scientific miracle that we miss the point of the text. The point is not the scientific miracle. It's the theological miracle. The text says, "the Lord provided" - God provided. God saved Jonah. Jonah doesn't get what he deserved. He doesn't get punished. He gets saved! God could have been fair and given Jonah what he so richly deserved. But God was unfair and gave Jonah what he didn't deserve. He saved him.

2:1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. Now, at last, Jonah is praying. Here is his poetry, a psalm of Jonah.

² He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.³ You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.⁴ I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.⁷ "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.⁸ "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD." As he sank down toward the bottom of the sea, Jonah prayed to God. "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you," he says. Jonah says in verse eight that when we cling to worthless idols, we forfeit the grace that could be ours. Jonah has been clinging to the worthless idol of independence and individualism. He had been saying, "Not your will God, but mine. I'll decide what is the right thing to do. And he says the result is that we give up, we reject, the grace that could be ours. Actually, the text says we give up the steadfast love that could be ours - the steadfast love of God.

Jonah's psalm is many things. It's petition, it's testimony, it's confession, and it's thanksgiving, all rolled into one. And now Jonah has reached the same point as the sailors. He's making promises to God and wants to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. He's reached the same point of faith as those outsiders, those foreign sailors. The poem, this psalm of Jonah, ends with the words, "Salvation comes from the Lord." And, indeed it does.

¹⁰ And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Indeed, salvation comes from God. It is not something that we earn. We get it despite what we deserve. It comes at God's initiative. God provided the fish. Now God commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto the land. It's a pretty unpleasant image, actually, but the Old Testament is often less tactful than we might think is polite - and more earthy than we think Holy Scripture should be. That probably says a lot about our discomfort with a God who knows us so completely and intimately and is always present. In any event, we'll leave Jonah on the beach to clean himself up and pick up the text with the third chapter, next week. **Amen!**