

It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.

Weekly Edition – August 26, 2016

Jonah – Chapter 2 – part 2

Tom's Silence Day 29

¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. ² He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and You listened to my cry. ³ You hurled me into the depths, 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.'

Three Reflections on Today's Text

First Consideration: You threw Me into the Deep

- 1) Last week we saw that we can never descend so far as to be out of the reach of divine mercy.
- 2) This week we turn to the second part of Jonah's prayer. He now describes the actions of the One to whom he prays. Even though the prayer is the story of Jonah's own life, the language draws us to the Lord's doings, not Jonah's.
- 3) In this we see Jonah not as the one doing, but rather as the one suffering. In the first chapter, the narrative suggested that Jonah was agent of all that happened to him – it was as if it was Jonah's choices that got him to where he now is – in the belly of a great fish in the depths of the sea, as good as dead.
- 4) But now the narrative changes in Jonah's prayer. Rather than being the agent, Jonah is the object on whom the agent acts. The agent, of course, is God. "You threw me into the deep." Every description of redemption in Holy Scripture frames the "redeemed" as being the objects of divine grace. It is received. "Christ died *for me*." "He was crucified *for us* under Pontius Pilate."
- 5) Jonah's prayer is not a prayer of confession of sin or even a prayer to ask for forgiveness. The dead cannot ask for forgiveness, nor can they be healed or save themselves. The dead are just that – dead. So the focus of Jonah's prayer is on much larger things than what Jonah has done or can do. The focus of Jonah's prayer is on the power of the sea, death, and Sheol, as well as the will of the Lord to have mercy even upon dead.
- 6) Yet in God's economy, there is no mercy without justice, so the first action in this story of redemption is the Lord throwing Jonah overboard. Jonah is certainly a sinner, and the first part of the book to deal with Jonah himself is when the sailors toss him overboard. Those sailors are the hands of the Lord – His faithful servants.
- 7) We are about to see how God deals with dead sinners. But first, we need to acknowledge they are dead because God kills them. It is the Lord who throws Jonah into the sea – and in this we see a deeper truth that sin is its own punishment – leading ultimately to death. Sin is its own punishment precisely because God made human beings to live in His sight, so when we turn from Him in sin, we turn towards inevitable death, as Jonah does in his descent begun back in chapter 1. This is the Lord's doing, who made us this way.

Jonah

One of the Twelve Prophets

1. The Word of the Lord
2. Jonah's mission
3. Jonah flees
4. The storm
5. The great fish
6. Three days in the belly
7. Jonah delivered
8. Nineveh repents
9. Jonah pouts
10. The gourd
11. God's mercy

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- 8) It is God's doing that sinners are indeed the cause of their own death. It's Jonah's fault, but that didn't mean that the Lord didn't put him there. This is Good News, for the result is that in every trouble in which we find ourselves we may turn and pray to the One who brought us there, who can also bring us out! That is promise of redemption! This is the hope of the Gospel!
- 9) From whatever hell we sinners have made for ourselves, we may say to the Lord: "*6 You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. 7 Your wrath lies heavily on me; You have overwhelmed me with all Your waves,*" and therefore, we may have hope!

Application: Have I been living with some self-made entanglement that I have been too ashamed to take to the Lord in prayer? Is there some kind of "scrambled eggs" in my circumstances right now that I have been attempting to put right under my own power? What would it take to surrender it to the Lord in prayer?

Second Consideration: God's Waves and Breakers

- 1) The word for "heart" of the sea is the same as the anatomical term for the organ in our chests but also the psychological term for the power of understanding. Yet it can also mean the "middle" or center of something, especially if it is remote, inaccessible and deep. The phrase "heart of the sea" is often found in the Old Testament where it means open sea far from shore – places of vulnerability where one is at the mercy of forces too big and for which human ability is no match.
- 2) The Lord is master over the heart of the sea, as when Holy Scripture proclaims: *8 By the blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up. The surging waters stood up like a wall; the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea. 9 The enemy boasted, 'I will pursue, I will overtake them. I will divide the spoils; I will gorge myself on them. I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them.'* *10 But You blew with Your breath, and the sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters.* (Exodus 15:8-10)
- 3) Here begins a series of images of being surrounded, overwhelmed, and entangled by waters, which echoes other biblical poetry about besieging armies, the power of Sheol, and the terror of divine wrath. It begins with the waters surrounding Jonah, but it gets worse. They go up over his head! Worse yet, it the Lord's own water: "*Your waves and breakers...*"
- 4) The power of water to engulf and destroy make it a fitting image of the terror of the fierce indignation of God: *16 Your wrath has swept over me; Your terrors have destroyed me. 17 All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.* (Psalm 88:16-17)
- 5) The whole time Jonah was descending from the face of the Lord in chapter 1, God was in fact casting him out of His sight. Jonah's flight is the Lord's doing, the just punishment of Jonah's disobedience that casts him into exile, taking him further and further away from the land of the living.
- 6) In the same way, the people of Israel turned away from the Lord, falling into the worship of golden calves, and eventually being taken captive by the Assyrians as the Lord "*cast them out from His face.*" (2 Kings 17:20)

Application: How am I surrounded, overwhelmed and entangled by the mighty waters of my circumstances? What about my circumstance as a sinner before the face of a Holy and Righteous God?

Third Consideration: I will Look to Your Holy Temple

- 1) From the depths of the belly of a great fish in the depths of the heart of the sea – a place of darkness and hopelessness – Jonah yet has confidence to cast a glance towards the Lord's holy temple – or more literally, "the temple of Your holiness" – which is to say the place where the Lord God is set apart as holy.

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- 2) Despite His unique unlikeness to all other things, God has chosen a place on earth as a holy habitation to which we may look in prayer. This was the temple in Jerusalem. The temple stands at the opposite end of the scale of holiness from Sheol and the heart of the sea. It is the center of sacred geography, in contrast to the outer darkness, formless waste of chaos, disorder, and death into which Jonah has sunk, cast out like the scapegoat.
- 3) Yet even here, Jonah can look to the place that gives meaning and definition to all other places, as all other places are “down” from the holy place. The Lord, the God of heaven dwells between the cherubim, enthroned on high, and precisely for that reason He “beholds the depths.” God does not dwell on earth – He is too big for that and even the heavens of heavens cannot contain Him. (1 Kings 8:27) In this respect the temple in Jerusalem is His footstool (1 Chronicles 28:2) – the place where He rests His feet and therefore the place on earth where we can come into His presence and worship. (Psalm 99:5 & 132:7)
- 4) But there is no place on earth or in the depths of the sea where He is absent. Precisely in His height, He is present in all the depths. Uncontained by the heaven of heavens, He is beyond the limitations of time and space, and therefore He is present at all times and in all places, unlike all created things that are dependent upon Him for their being in the world.
- 5) Despite Jonah's exile from the face of the Lord, he looks back to that from which he is exiled. That he can look back or keep looking back even from this deep darkness to which he has been exiled is proof of the redemption of which Jonah speaks in the past tense as if already having been accomplished. Without redemption, it would be impossible for Jonah to look back – or to undertake any sort of doing – because the dead of Sheol are dead – period. But Jonah lives, because His salvation has already been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ.
- 6) Jonah can look to the Lord in His temple even though he is absent from it, just as he can praise the Lord for a deliverance that, from the belly of a great fish, is still distant from him in the future. His prayer is outside of time – joining past and present as though there is no division between them – speaking to God who is outside of them and present to the past and the present and the future all at the same time.
- 7) Some call this the powerless power of prayer – meaning prayer that is utterly dependent on what is not yet, the promises of God still to be fulfilled. This is the hope of our Christian life and faith. We pray in the body of Christ which is a temple destroyed and rebuilt (John 2:19-22) but now no longer visible to us as we await His coming again. Yet even now, our life is hidden in Christ who sits at God's right hand and will come again in glory! (Colossians 3:1-4)
- 8) For us to pray with Jonah is to look towards that temple, no longer the stones on the mount in Jerusalem, but that Holy of Holies where Christ makes intercession for us before His Father. To Him we lift our voices like sheep calling out to their Shepherd, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4) and about to be overwhelmed by waters that will actually kill us. After all, we are all terminal in a manner of speaking – no one gets out of here alive.
- 9) Yet we await the resurrection of the dead by faith in Jesus Christ and look forward to that heavenly home of which it is written: “*What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived*” – *the things God has prepared for those who love Him.* (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Application: This is the hope to which I am called in Jesus Christ. While it is promised and sealed with the pledge of Christ's precious body and blood, even so, Jesus conditioned His grace with the conditional word, “if.” “Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me.” We all have crosses to bear. Some of mine are.....?