

Hunger Coalition mission moment; Faithfulness/tragedy
September 28, 2014
Boone United Methodist, Jason Byassee

A sign

It's been new for me to preach series. That is, to take a topic and spend 4, 6, 8 weeks on it from different angles. Doing this allows me in here and Vern in Crossroads to preach the same topics. That in turn allows our community groups to study the same questions together. It gets us all on the same page. We have a new series coming up in a few weeks on the Life Cycle, we'll work backwards, Benjamin Button style, starting with old age October 19 and finishing with infancy just before Advent and the birth of Christ. October 5 we'll start our stewardship season. As our finance chair told me, "Jason you'll have to preach about money some more," so we all have that to look forward to. But for now we're not in a series. And I'm a little out of sorts.

What we've kept on doing is talking about the surprising faithfulness of God. We've had a few weeks on tragedy and on prayer, mostly from the Old Testament. So it's become a sort of accidental series in response to your lives. I'm struck how much difficulty each person faces. And you ask me when you look up from your sorrow, "How do I pray?" The good news is the bible knows your pain. Everyone who prays in the bible means it. God! Help! I'm dying! The enemy is winning! Make this right! It's hard to open a page of the bible without finding a prayer. And these prayers are the gritty prayers of a people crushed—no one other than God can possibly help. So many of our prayers are so anemic. Lord please bless blah blah blah. I need a parking place. Or whatever. The bible says I am in death and there is no one to help and I am afraid. Be my deliverer. No one else can. The bible prays with more depth and more grace than we can begin to imagine. Whatever you face you are not alone.

Jonah is a perfect example. The chapter I'm about to read comes from Jonah the belly of a great fish. Hard to imagine things much worse than that. God asked Jonah to go to Ninevah, Israel's enemy, to preach and¹ Jonah found a ticket going the other way, to Tarshish, the exact opposite direction. And Jonah went down—down to the water, down into a ship, down into the hold of a ship, then the pagan sailors realized the storm was due to him so they put him down into the water, now he's in the belly of a fish and he can't get any lower. And Jonah prays. You who pray whoever you are, whatever you're facing, you aren't any lower than Jonah. ²"Weeds were wrapped around my head," Jonah laments. Now I'm a good swimmer, but I can't imagine swimming choked in vegetation. Jonah imagines himself behind prison bars,³ "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever." Jonah can go no lower. He's hit rock bottom, as they say in AA. So he does all he can. He prays. Like this. Hear this word.

Jonah 1:17-3:2

17 The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 2 saying,
I called to the Lord out of my distress
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
3 You cast me into the deep,

¹ <http://raymcdonald.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/jonahruns.jpg>

² Jonah 2:5b on screen: "Weeds were wrapped around my head"

³ Jonah 2:6 on screen plz

into the heart of the seas,
 and the flood surrounded me;
 all your waves and your billows
 passed over me
 4 Then I said, "I am driven away
 from your sight;
 how shall I look again
 upon your holy temple?"
 5 The waters closed in over me;
 the deep surrounded me;
 weeds were wrapped around my head
 6 at the roots of the mountains.
 I went down to the land
 whose bars closed upon me forever;
 yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
 O Lord my God
 7 As my life was ebbing away,
 I remembered the Lord;
 and my prayer came to you,
 into your holy temple.
 8 Those who worship vain idols
 forsake their true loyalty.
 9 But I wish the voice of thanksgiving
 will sacrifice to you;
 What I have vowed I will pay.
 Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"
 10 Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. 3:1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying 2 "Get up, go to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

This is the Word of God, for the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Three parts to today,⁴ one, how to pray in the weeds, two, the world and us, and three, who's with me? One, how to pray in the weeds.

Our family visited the Georgia aquarium recently and saw three whale sharks,⁵ I didn't know such creatures existed, but I'll never forget them now.⁶ When they open their mouths to feed it looks like the whole ocean falls in. They're harmless to humans. Even knowing that I don't really want to be near one. You and I think of the ocean as fun, a place to vacation. The ancient world saw it as a highway for commerce and travel and a place to die horribly. It's a place of terror, of chaos, storms and monsters and enemies. Jonah takes to the sea rather than going overland to preach to his enemies. And this is Jonah's genius—a professor from my college who's not a Christian calls Jonah one of the greatest works of world literature. The fish does God's bidding. Jonah does not. God appoints the fish and the fish does what God says. God appoints Jonah and Jonah does not.

⁴ Points on screen plz

⁵ http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2013/04/29/article-2316605-19894FEC000005DC-67_964x549.jpg

⁶⁶⁶ http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/10/whale-sharks/img/04-whale-sharks_1600.jpg

This is the source of Jonah's misery. He tries to run from the presence of God. It can't be done. There is no place without God.⁷ "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried," scripture says. At this point in Israel's history she didn't yet believe in heaven or hell. Sheol was where you went in the afterlife, a shadowy dark confusing place. We might translate this "Out of the depths of hell I cried." And that's good news for some of you. Hell is precisely where you are. In hell. Weeds wrapped around your neck. Bars in your way. Not just in the chaotic sea but under it in a great fish no way out. Ever felt that way? You're not alone.

The thing to do is to pray. Jonah didn't want to, he wanted to run away. God wouldn't have it. A friend of mine describes her conversion this way, she was running over here, and God said, oh, that's cute, and picked her up and put her over here. Good, now you're where I want you, God says. Jonah can't run now, can't do much of anything, except pray. When y'all have something awful happen and come to me you ask how to pray. You ask that because they bounce off the ceiling, fall flat. So many of our prayers are childish. Jesus does command us to be childlike, to trust. But we have to pray as mature adults. We can't say "Now I lay me down to sleep" when we're facing divorce, or death, or financial ruin. We have to pray like Jonah,⁸ "You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me."

I was watching ESPN's top 10 plays, and this time of year they're all baseball plays, and all fielding plays, if you've seen one homerun you've seen em all. Players diving for line drives, leaping to steal homeruns. And my favorite—the infielder fielding and throwing in one motion, or catching and leaping and throwing someone out. Remarkable. Watching them you realize these guys practice, over and over, till they could throw to first blindfolded, till they're sick of that play. With all that practice they know what to do when something unexpected happens. They don't have to think. They just react. Practice allows innovation. So too with prayer. Practice praying like Jonah. Over and over. I don't care if you're sick of it pray again. That way when you really need a prayer that'll lift the luggage you've got Jonah chapter 2 right where you want it.⁹ "I said, 'I am driven away from your sight . . . The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me.'"

Being back at Duke last week I was heartbroken to learn two students committed suicide on the same day. Didn't know each other. One an English PhD student 5th year, one an engineering student sophomore. And all the school could offer was counseling. If you need to see someone go to the counseling center. Now that's good, but it's not enough. I'd have liked a prayer. For one so deep in misery they have no prayers for themselves. For those who harm themselves. For the rest of us to realize life is precious and has to be protected. For the rest of us there is this good news. You don't have to make up prayers when you suffer. Pray like Jonah, who went so far down we can't even imagine. Aldous Huxley imagines the prayer with this poem. Huxley wrote *A Brave New World*—it was the rival dystopian book to George Orwell's *1984*. Huxley feared not that we'd be taken over by a group like the Soviets, but that we'd be entertained to death, our brains would turn to mush, and we'd be easily ruled. Huxley is more right. Huxley imagines Jonah this way.¹⁰

Seated upon the convex mound
of one vast kidney Jonah prays
and sings his canticles and hymns.
Making the hollow vault resound
God's goodness and mysterious ways

⁷ Jonah 2:2

⁸ Jonah 2:3 on screen plz

⁹ Jonah 2:4-5 on screen plz.

¹⁰ Poem on screen please

Til
the great fish spouts music as he swims.

When we struggle friends don't imagine God is far. God is never more near. Look at the prayer he gives us just for those in the darkest despair.

¹¹Two, the world and us. There are Christian traditions that imagine the world as a nasty and evil place. The church however is a good and noble place, light against the world's darkness. Those traditions don't do well in Boone, where everything is so beautiful you can't hate the world, you remember God made it. But there are such places. They imagine the world sort of like a mom imagines a public bathroom—don't touch that! Wash your hands! Stay away from that!¹¹ That's always tempting. One temptation for Judaism is to think election means they're God's favorite, everyone else is not elect, unimportant, unfaithful. This book is written for Israel. Jonah is Israel. The city of Ninevah is the seat of wickedness, a place of evil and terror. The prophet Nahum says this of Ninevah,¹² "City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful . . . no end to the plunder!" It's like the way my grandparents' generation viewed Berlin—the heart of darkness. Jonah doesn't want to go. He doesn't want em to repent. He doesn't want em saved. He wants them to burn. When Ninevah repents Jonah screams,¹³ "I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." And he wants to die. Jonah is the worst missionary in world history. I've met some great ones. Leighton Ford who will preach for us in August is wise, gentle, funny, he makes me want to love God, he's like Gandalf come to life. Jonah is reprehensible. On the ship the pagan sailors pray. Jonah sleeps. They ask him to pray. He won't. They throw him overboard. Jonah makes sailors pious, maybe the only time that's ever happened,¹⁴ "The men feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." Jonah makes pagan sailors look good. Even the fish obeys God. When Jonah preaches the worst sermon ever in Ninevah, "Forty days and you'll be dead!" all Ninevah repents in sackcloth and ashes, even the cows repent. Every pagan in this story responds to God appropriately. The story ends and Jonah is still a whiny prophet. God's people are often the worst. The pagans are often the best. And this is why we can't view the world as a dark ugly place. Because it's not. God has not been stingy with his gifts. There are gobs of wisdom and grace outside the church, and much sin within the church. And shouldn't God care about Ninevah? That great city? 300,000 people? 3 days to walk across? And they don't even know their right hand from their left? One of our Cherokee mission trip folkstold us of folks at his job saying we ought to just nuke the middle east. Really? Kill em all? Children included? People who hate the bad guys? Innocent grandmas? I was so proud of him for speaking up against that. God is vastly more merciful than we are.

There is a Jewish story about this passage that the ship Jonah boarded had 70 sailors on it. In Jewish mythology there are 70 nations of the world. One man for every nation. In other words the pious sailors are the gentiles. Jonah the whiny unfaithful one is Israel. Who views themselves this way? Elect to fail. Non-elect to be praised. That's the bible. The first are last. The rich are on bottom, poor on top. Israel is elect to be a servant all the way to Jesus' cross.

A friend of mine describes Jonah this way. Tarshish is religion. The things we do, the structure, the form. But Ninevah is the gospel. Our enemies whom God treasures and wants to save. We do Tarshish really really well. We could have church for years if God died and who'd ever notice?! Ninevah though is risky, difficult, dangerous. And that's the world God came to save, the world God loves, the world God is saving through the church right now. When I read this I thought that's my attitude toward the church. The whole

¹¹ II. The world and us

¹² Nahum 3:1 on screen plz

¹³ Jonah 4:2 on screen please

¹⁴ Jonah 1:16

church in America might vanish, but I'll be alright, I'll find a way to ride it out. But in Jonah God uses Jonah to bless his enemies. And Jonah turns out terribly. That's the biblical way, to follow this God means we'll be miserable, on a cross, like Jonah, like Jesus. But God will use us to bless the people God wants, Ninevah, Boone, our worst enemy.

¹⁵Three who's with me. No one ever prays this prayer alone.¹⁶ When Jonah prays, "Deliverance belongs to the Lord," he is praying it with the book of Jonah. The word there for deliverance is *Yeshua*, the word that becomes Jesus' very name, "God saves." When Jesus' opponents want a sign he says "I'm not given you no stinking sign. Read Jonah." Or in Jesus' own words, ¹⁷"As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the son of Man will be three days in the heart of the earth." Those of us who pray from the weeds, in the depths, in jail, are never alone. Jesus has been part of each of those. Jesus has reached far below us, whoever *we* are, to get us and all the others. Jonah isn't just in the depths because he's faithless. It's because that's where God is, suffering alongside the world, to save. Jesus isn't far from us when we suffer, he's suffering worse, when we look over we see him right there with us.

But that's not enough by itself. Jonah is delivered. He's coughed up no land, and God says, ah, yes, Jonah, where were we? Oh yes, you're going to Ninevah. Some faiths might think bad favor is a sign of God's curse. Not us. It's a sign God is about to be good to us. Whatever pit we're in Jesus is there with us. And he turns that pit into a tomb that he empties. Our own Cheryl Marshbanks, when someone had something terrible happen, used to say oh good, let's see what good thing God is going to do with this. Every tomb is awaiting resurrection.

This is why we have to be there for one another. One of the kids attending King Street Church with Luke heard about Jesus asking the disciples to keep watch. He'd never heard that before. When his girlfriend broke up with him he texted another King Streeter: "I need you to keep watch with me tonight." And he did. Needed, completed, gratitude. In another recent meeting Luke explained they would be eating Jesus' body and blood, becoming part of his body. These folks hadn't taken communion for years, if ever. And one friend offered to another the body of Christ. "I couldn't believe I got to offer him that kind of love," he said.

Final thing for today. I'm struck by what Jonah says life and death is. We think we know—we can tell someone is alive, someone else is dead. The Jesus Seminar that spends its time debunking stuff in the gospels had a funeral home director go to a press conference to say, no, indeed, dead people don't come back to life. Thanks! Everyone knows that! But plenty of people who seem alive aren't. And plenty of people who have death certificates are very much alive indeed. Jonah says this,¹⁸ "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" Death is trying to pretend you're not in God's presence. Life is being aware of being in God's presence. Jonah is dead when he tries to run from God. He lives when even in the bottom of hell he prays.

So here's the word for you suffering, for you not, for you alive, for you dead: pray like this. Weeds around the head, in the pit, given over to death, no presence of God. Because you may need such prayers one day. And that day may be now. Amen.

ⁱ This is the pastor at Granger Memorial UMC's point.

¹⁵ III. Who prays with me?

¹⁶ This bit of 2:9 on screen plz

¹⁷ Mt. 12:38 on screen plz

¹⁸ Jonah 2:4 on screen plz