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When You Hit Bottom, Look Up
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Jonah 1.17-2:10

Last Sunday, we left Jonah sinking beneath the stormy waves after he was thrown overboard. Let's pick up the story in Jonah 1:17.

"But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, 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. 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**. Then I said, *I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?* **The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head 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. As **my life was ebbing away**, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with **the voice of thanksgiving** will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. **Deliverance belongs to the LORD!**'

Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."

If you read or listen to these words slowly and reflect on them, it isn't hard to feel down or depressed. Listen again to the images, words and phrases that are used to describe Jonah's situation: *"The belly of Sheol, the deep, the heart of the seas, the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever."* Have you ever felt like Jonah did? Those of us who have struggled with depression, pressure, grief, or stress; who have felt overwhelmed by our circumstances, powerless or helpless can certainly relate to how Jonah is feeling. It's like being in deep water over your head, sinking, feeling nothing to support you, no place to stand, no solid ground, no air to breathe, fearing your life is ebbing away – it's to be in a state of desperation. That is where we may find ourselves if we, like Jonah, refuse to listen to God. God invites us to an adventurous life of obeying and serving God. Jonah not only failed to obey God's will, he compounded his sin by seeking to flee as far away from God as he possibly could.

Refusing to follow God's will may lead us eventually to a point in life where, like Jonah, we feel like we're sinking. Feeling hopeless, we're painfully aware of our mortality. Suddenly there is a rushing noise and a large dark form. The jaws of God's grace open like mighty gates; there is a gulp, and then, quiet. Jonah finds himself in a place of smothering confinement: wet, dark, claustrophobic, cocoon-like, but safe. Jonah, swallowed by a grace-filled fish, did not drown, and was saved. If you've ever had an MRI, imagine turning that place dark and wet, add motion and the element of not knowing how long you'll be in there, and you begin to get a

picture of Jonah's experience. He's in a place, like some of us, of severe and inescapable physical limitations. When we're strong and healthy, it's hard to imagine, but life can change in a moment.

One moment Jonah is taking a sea cruise due west, looking forward to the broad horizon, open space and fresh air of the sea, the next thing he knows he finds himself in a tight, confined, dark restrictive, fearful place that is the unattractive opposite of everything he was seeking. Often change comes for us, as it did for Jonah, as a direct consequence of an experience that forces us to recognize our limits. God probably will not send a great fish to swallow you up so that you have a near death experience and a change in perspective. However, often times a heart attack, surgery, an accident, detox, going to prison, a severe experience of isolation or abandonment, a significant loss or failure in our life, or a close brush with our own mortality – will lead to a significant change within us. I have visited with more than one person after he or she has had such an experience, whose response has basically been, *“This may sound strange, but I’m almost glad this happened. I’ll never be the same. It really woke me up.”*

Some people spend a good part of their lives sailing away from God, refusing to answer God's call to relationship, Christ-like character, and service to others, even when the pressure upon them is so great they feel like they're being crushed. Jonah hits bottom because he disobeys God. The whole movement of the story is downward until Jonah's prayer. **Five times we hear of Jonah going down.** Down to Joppa, down into the hold, he lays down, down in the fish, down to the roots of the mountains at the bottom of the sea. Down where the shifting sands would bury him forever, where the bars of his pride, fear and his own ego would imprison him forever - Jonah is as down as a person can get. Finally, when Jonah hits bottom, he looks up and calls on God.

When we're down like Jonah, feeling like we're at the roots of the mountains with seaweed wrapped around our head; when we're in bed and want only to wrap the blanket or pillow over our head, and wish the world would go away because nothing is going our way. When the pressure seems crushing and hope appears lost, we also can turn to God. **When you hit bottom, look up, because if you change where you look, you'll change your perspective. Lie down on the floor of your kitchen sometime and see how it alters your perspective of that space. When Jonah starts looking up to God, he begins to pray.** There are several interesting things to note about Jonah's prayer.

First, three days go by before Jonah prays. *“Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God...”* Perhaps it took Jonah a while to realize he was not lunch; that he had not yet perished. Maybe he was ashamed to pray to God after so blatantly disobeying the Lord, and knowing he deserved to be punished. Yet if we all prayed only when we thought we were most faithful or most acceptable to God, there'd be even less praying going on than there is now! Perhaps it's not surprising that more people pray to God in situations of great desperation, but how much better it is for prayer and communicating with God to be a normal, regular part of our life every day. **Don't wait, like Jonah did, until you're desperate to start praying.**

A second thing to note is *how* Jonah prayed. If you look closely at Jonah's prayer, who is at the heart of it? Who is mentioned the most? It isn't God. It's Jonah. With everything he's experienced, just when you think Jonah is going to confess and repent of his sin, and praise God for doing something wonderful, Jonah continues to focus on himself. Not only that, he goes on to criticize and judge those who worship idols. When Jonah was on the boat with the sailors and the boat was going through the storm, the sailors were calling out to their gods for help. Jonah is so self-righteous that he now sits in judgment upon those sailors who did everything they could to save his life. God is keeping Jonah alive when he should be dead. God has been more gracious to Jonah than he deserves, and he still can't be gracious to others. Think about it. The heathen sailors prayed. Jonah did not. They were eager to discover who was responsible for the calamity that had come upon them. Jonah was not. The sailors at least practiced their religion. Jonah did not. The sailors had compassion on Jonah, yet Jonah now shows none toward them. By virtually any measure, the Gentile sailors proved to be superior to Jonah from all that we heard in the first chapter, and yet Jonah prays in a way that makes it clear he still feels superior to them. Remember the story of the Pharisee and the Tax collector in Luke 18:10-14? The Pharisee thinks he is so righteous and prays to God, "*God, thank you that I am not like this sinner.*" Jonah is like the Pharisee in this story. He's so self-righteous that he doesn't acknowledge what he has done wrong, and instead condemns others. He focuses his prayer completely on himself. **Don't pray selfishly like Jonah did.**

It's interesting to compare Jonah's prayer with other prayers in the Bible. Last month we looked at the book Daniel, and Daniel's prayer in chapter 9 is a good example. Daniel's prayer is full of confession and repentance and thanksgiving for God and focusing on what God has done. There is a lot of focusing on himself and his country, but it's always in reference to their sin, not to their goodness. Also, he puts himself right in step with the worst of them. Daniel, the righteous man of God, puts himself in the same category as all of Israel, who were worshiping false idols. Daniel's prayer is a good example of how we should pray. So is Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah chapter one.

A third thing to note is *what* Jonah prayed. Given his circumstances, he's feeling crushed and overwhelmed; we might anticipate a prayer of lament, confession or contrition. **However, Jonah offers a prayer of thanksgiving.** He has hit bottom and looks up to God and prays, and gives thanks. One of the things that helps to change our perspective and our attitude is to give thanks for everything we possibly can no matter what we're facing. I Thessalonians 5:16-18, instructs us to "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" Jonah is at least trying to do that.

A fourth thing to note about Jonah's prayer is that virtually none of it is original. His prayer is composed of words, images and phrases drawn from the book of Psalms. Why is it mere bits and pieces? Well, Jonah didn't exactly have a copy of the Torah and a waterproof flashlight with him, so the only scripture he had was the scripture he could remember. The value of knowing scripture is demonstrated when we hit bottom, and we have nowhere else to turn. Then to know that "*they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, the Lord is my*

Shepherd, the Lord is my light and my salvation, thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path,” and countless other passages comes in handy.

But when we compare Jonah’s “psalm” with that of the Psalms, the shallowness of Jonah’s prayer becomes clear. Jonah focuses on himself throughout the prayer, his needs, his worries, what he has done, how righteous he is in comparison to the sailors, and how he will keep his vows and how he will make a sacrifice to God. In the Book of Psalms, the psalmists also describe their deliverance, although the particulars are generally left out, and then they quickly turn from their personal experience to the character of God. **The Psalms are God-centered while Jonah’s prayer is self-centered.**

We might re-write Jonah’s prayer of thanksgiving this way, *“God, I thank you because I know I deserved to drown for how I disobeyed you. I sought to sail away from your presence but when I did you were already waiting for me. I thank you that I am not being eaten; I am being preserved. I thank you that this not my tomb but a womb where a new person is being formed. I thank you that from the place of darkness and death that you have let me live. May I not live in such a way that you cannot stomach me, but by your grace and love enable me to live faithfully, generously and thankfully for you.”*

Jonah slowly realizes that the whale is not his tomb, but a womb from which he may be re-born; a changed a person. God is at the beginning and end of Jonah’s story, and our own, and everywhere in between. God is the primary actor. God provides the fish, hears and answers Jonah when he has hit bottom, and God brings Jonah up from the pit, and delivers him.

For some of us it’s when we hit bottom, and have no other place to turn that we turn and discover that God is with us even and especially when life seems most bleak. Looking around our nation and the world, there are so many situations that are troubling. Huge hurricanes, terrible fires, deadly earthquakes and flooding, unending war, threat and fear between our nation and North Korea, callousness, indifference, falsehood, ignorance, and greed. In the face of these troubles, we also see ordinary people and first responders doing what they can to help others. We witness examples of caring and generosity large and small. While there is much work to do be done in response to numerous circumstances, one of the things we need to do is to confess our own sin, disobedience, self-righteousness, and pride. We need to ask God to humble us, and see the best in others. We need to pray for courage to be good witnesses and servants of the Lord. If we treat others poorly or condescendingly like Jonah, why would they want to become one of us? People are watching us and what we do. How we live and what we say to non-Christians can determine whether or not they’ll ever be interested in coming to church with us or listening to the gospel. Watch what you say, what you do, and your attitudes— are they the words, deeds and attitudes of Jesus Christ? They matter more than you know.

In many ways, Jonah shows us how not to pray. Don’t focus so much on yourself and your needs. Pray focused on God and what God wants for your life. Don’t look down upon others in your prayers. Don’t make promises to God in order to get what you want. Jonah prays about

being in the temple offering sacrifices and making vows, when what God wants is for him to be obedient and go to Nineveh. Jonah still doesn't get it.

Chapter Two ends with the fish vomiting Jonah onto dry land. Vomited is a harsh word. Perhaps it shows God's reaction to Jonah's prayer as well as God's deep mercy and grace. The fish obeyed God. Up to this point, Jonah has not. We will see how Jonah responds to his second chance next week.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Jonah hits bottom because? When have you hit bottom in my life? What happened?
2. How does it feel to be in "over your head?" Have you ever had an experience that forced you to recognize your limitations? What was that like?
3. How does Jonah respond to the pressure of his solitary confinement?
4. What is surprising about Jonah's prayer? How can we learn to pray with hope and thanksgiving even in the midst of difficult or dire circumstances?
5. Have you had a time when God brought you "up from the Pit?"
6. What do you think is represented by Jonah's time in the fish?