

Wot? No Whale?

3: From the Belly of the Big Fish

Jonah 2:1 - 3:5

² 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,
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 for ever;
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 with 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 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

Jonah is swallowed by a great fish, and somewhere in its depths he makes a prayer which concludes with the declaration “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” God gives his prophet a second chance to do as he is told and this time Jonah obeys. What’s more, the response of the Ninevites to the stark message Jonah brings is immediate and total. They believe God, proclaim a fast and demonstrate their remorse by putting on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. A neat and tidy job done. “And they all lived happily ever after,” the fairytale might conclude.

But this is no fairytale, and this is not the end.

A big fish or a small imagination: Could it really happen?

Recent news articles about a South African diver who was swallowed by a huge Bryde’s whale whilst trying to photograph a sardine run from the centre of a huge bait ball of fish suggest that it is certainly possible for a whale to sweep up a human in its mouth as it reaches for its more usual prey. However, this man’s ordeal lasted less than two seconds.

Three nights in the belly of the big fish: our sense of what is real or possible is challenged by this. But the oceans are full of all kinds of creatures. Let your imagination play with all the possibilities, and respond creatively. The dark space adrift from all the familiar sights, sounds and smells of normal life gave time for Jonah to reflect and search his soul. Jonah is overwhelmed and at the mercy of this enormous creature which has been miraculously provided by God.

How do you respond to the idea of miracles? Jesus’ miracles may be seen as fantastical by some, yet we believe that they did happen; that those five small barley loaves and two fish somehow fed at least five thousand people. And not only that, but the miracle pointed to a bigger message beyond simply providing food when the people were in need.

The big fish may be viewed as a way of bringing Jonah to his senses, similar to the way that Balaam’s donkey spoke to the stubborn prophet. Yet again, we see God speaking through his created world.

Reflect: How is God speaking to you today?

Consider a particular situation in the world which concerns you.

Jonah’s Psalm - Sorry/Not Sorry

This psalm can be viewed in different ways. Consider which of these two readings sits well with you, or whether you prefer the idea of holding them together in creative tension.

Sorry

We can read this prayer as a sign of God’s grace and forbearance.

Jonah’s despair is illustrated in the first two verses of his prayer. His piteous cries are repeated: “I called to the Lord out of my distress; out of the belly of Sheol I cried.”

Sheol, also known as The Pit, is the gloomy nothingness which follows death in Hebrew writing. The images of him sinking ever deeper beneath the ocean, entangled in weeds and powerless to escape are powerful. There may be times when you have felt similarly overwhelmed.

Jonah believes that there is no return from this awful place where he finds himself, and yet even here God hears and answers his cries. “and he answered me..you heard my voice.” As “the bars closed upon me forever” he is brought back to the surface, back to life. God cares faithfully for this buried treasure, Jonah, so that he is rescued and able to promise to make sacrifices to God in the temple to which he so longed to return.

The declaration that “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” is the note on which Jonah is released on to dry land.

Not Sorry

We only see Jonah praying to God when he is inside the big fish. Some Jewish and Islamic commentators suggest that this shows that Jonah only calls on God when he has exhausted all other possibilities.

Jonah may well say that he will make sacrifices to God, but the rest of the book does not bear this out. His pious words do not lead to action. This is in contrast to the “heathen” sailors, who make vows and sacrifices, and also to the people of Nineveh, who, from their position of wealth, power and influence, humble themselves by putting on sackcloth.

The psalm is also a collage of phrases from the book of Psalms, as if Jonah is reciting familiar verses rather than responding to the precise situation he is in, and the reason why he is in this predicament; he was “cast into the deep” because he had run away from God’s call.

After his three days in the belly of the big fish, God does not speak directly to Jonah. He speaks to the fish - perhaps because Jonah wasn’t listening.

Jonah’s promise of thanksgiving and sacrifice is not seen in his cursory call to the Ninevites. He walks - but only one day out of the three it would take to get across the entire city. His words are blunt and unadorned by any sense of compassion or engagement with the inhabitants of the great city of Nineveh.

It’s possible to see the way that he only needs to walk for a day and part-way into Nineveh as a sign of God’s power and the eagerness with which the citizens responded.

The nuanced nature of his prayer and the way he goes about speaking to Nineveh reminds us that we are all works in progress. Jonah does not have the last word, and, yet again, God’s grace and willingness to work with human beings in all their contrariness is emphasised. Give thanks for the way that is true in your life, too.

Reflect: Listen to Allegri’s Miserere (Psalm 51). Follow the words in the Bible if helpful.

How does the Psalm encourage you?

What might the prayer to “renew a right spirit within me” look like for you this Lent?

*Reflection: How do we approach God? This poem explores the way that we come to God in prayer, and how we might listen to him more carefully.
What is its message for you?*

WE ARE JONAH

In Rabbi Eliezer's vision
Jonah entered the whale's mouth
as we enter a synagogue.

(An ancient collection of commentaries on Jewish lore)

Light streamed in through its eyes.

Jonah approached the *bimah*, the whale's head.

(Bimah: a raised platform in the synagogue)

"Show me wonders," he said, as though
his own life weren't a miracle.

The whale obliged, swimming down
to the foundation stone,
the navel of creation
fixed deep beneath the land.
"Tsk tsk," chided the fish:
"you're beneath God's temple --
you should pray."

Prayer requires stillness.
Running away had always been
so easy. Sitting silent
in self-judgement -- forget it!
But waves only churn the surface.
In the deep beneath the deep
Jonah was wholly present.

We all flee
from uncomfortable conversations
the drip of a hospital IV
the truths we don't want to own
the work we don't want to do.
Now we're in the belly of the whale,
someplace deep and strange.

God calls us to awareness:
to stand our ground
in the place where we are,
to do the work which needs doing.
To bring kindness and mercy
even to those who are unlike us.
Are we listening?

<https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2013/09/new-poem-for-yom-kippur-we-are-jonah.html>