

Problem:What does Jonah see in the belly of the fish? Why does he give praise to God?

-Have you ever toured a cave before? I know there are hundreds of caves and caverns you can tour all over Montana. One vivid memory I have is touring Kartchner Caverns with my grandparents in Arizona. On the tour, we saw all kinds of specially lit Stalactites and Stalagmites (I still can't remember which one is which). At the end of the tour, we were led into the largest room and given some time to look around. The tour director showed us how dark this room was to the first spelunkers that came through and turned off all the lights. It was so dark, I touched my hand to my nose and still couldn't see it. It was an incredibly disorienting experience for 20 seconds.

-Our story of Jonah continues today with Jonah in the belly of the fish.....dark, dank, and unsettling. I can just imagine Jonah, after being thrown into the sea and now in this fish touching his nose the same way I did as a kid in Kartchner Caverns and not being able to see anything in front of him. He could be thinking: what do I do now?

-Now, if you remember last week, Jonah son of (Amittai)"faithfulness" (as the joke goes) is not what you would call the most faithful, selfless, and fearless prophet. He buys a ticket in the opposite direction, knows that this storm is because of him, and in an almost diva-like fashion has himself thrown off the boat. One would think, given the history we know about this character, that he would sit in this fish cursing, moaning, and complaining about where he was. He, after all, can't see anything. It is figuratively and literally a dark time for Jonah.

-But he doesn't curse, moan, or complain. Infact, he starts to pray and sing: "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 brought up my life from the pit."

-What is going on here?? This isn't the Jonah we expect! Clearly, something in him changes as he is sitting in this great big fish belly. How can, in complete darkness, Jonah see anything hopeful let alone praise God for bringing up his life? Perhaps the belly is forcing him see a little differently.

Solution: Jonah's view changes when in the fish and though not knowing where exactly he is going, can see God's love.

-I had a friend in highschool who struggled with depression a lot. He once described to me what it felt like when he was in one of his "lows". He described it as being in a glass capsule which you can't really break free from. You can see everyone outside of the capsule living their lives like usual, but your interaction with them is limited. You are encapsulated in your own muck. You can't seem to break free from the confines and darkness of this capsule, even if you act like you can. Eventually, after medication and working with a therapist, he finally was beginning to learn tools to navigate these "lows" of depression. "This may sound weird," he said to me. "But, I have learned to actually appreciate my lows." Looking at him funny, I asked: really? Why? "Because they give

me an opportunity to evaluate and see myself differently. If everything is going well, there's no real need to stop and see yourself differently. It's by seeing myself differently in my low's that can usually get me out of them," he replied.

-I think this is what Jonah is talking about when he says "you brought up my life from the pit." Jonah, in the dark, smelly, and dreary belly of the fish now has a moment to relook at himself and God walking with him. Ironically, even when he can't see the hand in front of his face, he can see God's love more clearly than anything. Even though he saw himself initially as someone who didn't want to be a prophet: a sacrifice to God in order to make the waves stop, he now can see differently: his life once again rising (like the fish) and praising God. It's literally that death to life thing. For when you die and are reborn, you are able to see things differently.

- It's no wonder, then, that the early Christians compared Jesus' resurrection after three days in the tomb to Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish" Jesus even brings up the story of Jonah in Matthew 12. Jesus says: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth." It's literally that from death to life thing and when you come from death into life, you see things differently.

Implication: Maybe we need to spend time in the belly of the fish before we can be "vomited" and see things anew.

-Maybe, then, we need to be in the belly of the fish sometimes. I don't mean a nihilistic type of view of wishing suffering on people in order for them to "learn" or "be better". What I mean is that sometimes experiences which initially seem like they are too much or impossible (like not being able to see your hand in front of your head because it is too dark) actually turn out to be experiences that reveal God working through us in radical new ways. We will never be able to see it unless we are challenged to see in a new way.

-The word used for when the fish "spews" Jonah onto land is another joke (remember the jokes that you are supposed to count?!). The word literally means "upchuck with force" which is meant to tie in with Jonah's words of his life being "brought up". He's being brought up alright! Literally being tossed out of the fish and onto a new land, a new perspective, a new opportunity.

-About two weeks ago I was notified by Lydia Perry that her family found a new home and will be moving out of our Church Home in mid August. It is sad in a way as we have loved their care and warmth around the church and will miss them just next store-even though they will only be 10 miles away. Even so, after they told me this news, I felt a little like I was in the belly of the fish. What are we going to do now? I felt this despite the fact of how excited I am for their family's new chapter in life and their continual connection to Our Saviors.

-You never know what will happen in the belly of the fish, for it just so happens another opportunity has been sent our way for our Church Home. A previous school teacher from Bonner School just recently approached me about her passionate idea of using our Church Home as a space for a new preschool. You see, there is no licensed preschools in Bonner and the need for them in this community is astronomical. Infact, as we have learned a little bit through our community mapping interviews, this need is very real. This teacher already has about 6 families asking if they can pay a fee to reserve a spot and she hasn't even officially advertised yet. Over the past two weeks, members from your Church Council and I along with this prospective tenant have been doing a lot of research on if this idea, an idea which kind of landed in our laps, is actually possible. After many conversations with multiple county and state agencies, other churches that rent out space to preschools, and even a lawyer, we have found that actually it is quite possible. Infact, from our church's standpoint, it's not very difficult to do. There would not be much of anything we would have to do to the house in order for it to be a space for kids. I am incredibly excited about how this opportunity could benefit our church and larger community. But it's also something that our church needs to have a conversation about. Certainly there are questions that still remain so I encourage you to attend our congregational meeting next Sunday, July 17th after worship to hear more about this opportunity and offer your input.

-In many ways, due to the relative speed in which things have happened, I feel a little like Jonah being "thrown out" of the fish onto a new land of opportunity. And due to the fact of never having thought of using our church home as a space for preschool kids before, it becomes a new way for our church to practice a new way of seeing. Like Jonah, we don't know exactly where all of this is going to go. But, as we are "thrown" fresh from the belly of a fish, seeing things a little differently, may we walk together knowing nothing is impossible with God. Amen.