

Bible Readings

Jonah 2:2-10

² saying,

“I called out 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 For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your breakers and your waves
passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.’

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head.

⁶ To 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 When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the Lord!”

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way^[a] from the land,^[b] beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night^[c] he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the

sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

²⁸ And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, [\[d\]](#) he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Sermon

In the midst of a storm

Like the story of the feeding of the 5000, the story of Jonah is also a story with which many are familiar.

What God created in the first book of the bible, are all brought together in Jonah's story: the heavens, the dry land, the sea, a fish.

Jonah symbolizes Israel, while Nineveh represents evil in a concentrated form.

The Word of God came to Jonah twice. A second time was necessary, for Jonah ignored God's Word when it came to him the first time.

God had told Jonah to go to Nineveh because God wanted to put an end to all the evil in that city. But instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah flees the opposite direction.

He goes down: down to a Joppa where he boards a ship, to go to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Does this servant of God not know or does he choose not to know Psalm 139:7-10:

*"Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall
lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me"*

The Psalmist tells here of God's awesome and unexpected, quiet appearance during attempts to escape Him. And that is precisely what happened and what continues to happen, for God is the same. He is discerned and experienced, in the unexpected.

God threw the wind from the heavens onto the sea. While the storm rages and the crew panic and pray to their own gods, Jonah is sound asleep in the inner part of the ship. But he is found by the captain and is urged to pray to his God.

Moreover, the crew decide to cast lots, because the outcome of that will point to the person who is to blame for the storm. And surprise, surprise, the lot fell on Jonah. This makes them ask Jonah:

*⁸ What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country?
And of what people are you? (Jonah 1:7-10)*

Clearly, this was not included in Jonah's plan. He had not expected all these questions. The moment of truth, the revelation of Jonah's full identity has come and Jonah is completely honest when he says,

"I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. ¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

This is all happening while the storm gets worse. Jonah knows...he knows very well indeed, that the storm is related to his disobedience to God. Therefore Jonah tells the men of the ship to throw him into the sea.

How noble of him, to be willing to die for them. Isn't it...? No, this has nothing to do with nobleness. Well, if it is then it is nobleness that conceals stubbornness towards God. Stubbornness of the highest degree. Insistence not to obey God. Jonah rather drowns than go to Nineveh. He rather dies than do as God has told him.

But Jonah does not drown. Neither Jonah's stubbornness, nor his disobedience nor anything that goes against God's plan with him, makes God give up His plan with Jonah.

Jonah does not die because God gave this particular mission to Jonah, so it will be Jonah who has to carry it out, consistent with the words in Isaiah:

*So shall my word be that goes
out of my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that
which I purpose
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:11)*

Jonah will learn that his strategy is held within God's bigger strategy. Jonah is swallowed by a big fish. Those who really hear this story, discern that this fish

represents God's catching arms that don't let Jonah go.

Jonah stays in the belly of the fish, praying. A wonderful prayer, in which God is honored and praised, including the words

*When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple. (Jonah 2:7)*

After three days, Jonah is vomited out on dry land. Then Jonah receives, for the second time, God's Word. Jonah's second chance to speak to go and speak to Nineveh and he does it. Jonah proclaims as God told him to do,

'Yet, forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown'.

A hard judgment. Yet, it still carries within it God's mercy, as a period of forty days is included. There is still time for the people of Nineveh to turn away from their evil. And they do....to Jonah's unpleasant surprise, his mission turns out to have instant prophetic success: the people of Nineveh repent straight away. The result is that God does not do what He intended to do: He has compassion.

The sea crew was saved, the people of Nineveh were saved, all by the amazing grace of God. Acknowledgment of the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land; acknowledgement from those who first did not believe in this God.

This God walks, in our New Testament passage, on water.

Also a well-known bible story, which tells that Jesus has authority over God's creation, including the forces of nature.

Jesus parts from the disciples for He wants to be alone. He tells His disciples to go ahead of Him in the boat, to the other side of the. Then Jesus withdraws, up a mountain, to pray.

Meanwhile, being in the boat, the disciples are struck by a storm.

When Jesus goes to His disciples, over the water, the disciples see something that they don't understand and cry out in fear: a ghost!

Jesus responds to their fear and says: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

Learning that it is his Lord, Peter immediately says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Note Peter's trust and willingness; his eagerness to be with His Lord, in the midst of the raging storm. He *urges* Jesus to command him to come to Him.

But then, when Peter sees the wind, He cries out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!"

The wind and waves drive out Peter's faith. The solid ground on which Peter stands,

goes. It all happens before Jesus's eyes. It is a contrast to the moment when Peter, finding himself in the boat in the midst of the storm, urged Jesus to command him to come to Him. Jesus did call Peter and He did so on the basis of the trust and faith that Jesus saw in Peter.

The disappearance of faith due to the storms in life. A reality that unfolded before Jesus' eyes then, and unfolds before His eyes now: when we lose sight of Him as we let difficulties in life take over.

Disappointing for God, isn't it? When fear, anger, stubbornness take over and define one's perspective, words, acts, choices.

While that loss of concentration on Him has consequences, He is still there when you, like Peter say to Him: "Lord, save me."

Peter did not drown as a consequence of lack of faith, just as Jonah did not drown as a consequence of His disobedience.

Jesus, Yeshua, means God saves. He was sent into the world to do precisely that: to save people like Jonah, Peter and you and me from the consequences of losing faith; from the consequences of disobedience, from the consequences of making wrong decisions, but we need to ask Him to save us, just as Peter did. And when we do, we have to let Him do so in *His* way.