

# MINISTER'S MESSAGE

## Hang on to Your Life Raft

Based on Jonah 2:1-9

Jonah stood on the end of the dock and agonized at which direction to go. If he boarded the boat, he would land far, far away from the troubles at hand. It was running away, yes. He could acknowledge that. But didn't he deserve a little leniency from time to time? He had tried to be a good preacher. He had tried to get the world to listen. But nobody wanted to listen these days. And Jonah was tired of being heckled and taunted. He was tired of being ridiculed for his faith, and his proclamations of judgment on those who did not listen and change their ways. He was tired of being laughed at and scorned for doing the right thing. He'd earned the right to walk away, right?

So, about the time that Jonah should have been making friends with a camel to begin the long hot dusty ride to the city of Nineveh, Jonah instead, stepped on to a boat headed as far as possible in the opposite direction: a distant city near the edge of

the known world at the time; a city named Tarshish. He would never see the 'Welcome Sign' at the port of the city.

Sailors of the ancient day were known to be superstitious, and spooked easily at unexpected weather or strange circumstance. One can speculate too, perhaps, that money had changed hands, to allow for this unexpected passenger to be stowed away with the trading goods at the last minute. There was an air of intrigue and curiosity on deck as the sails were unfurled, which changed in the blink of an eye to fear, when an unexpected storm fell upon the boat, long after the shoreline had disappeared.

There had to be a reason for this squall. And it didn't take the sailors long to decide that Jonah was the problem. And that's because, well, Jonah

was the problem! And Jonah knew he was the problem. There was only one thing to do: make the problem go away. The story suggests, that it was Jonah's decision to be thrown overboard. The sailors were only too happy to comply.

What happened next is a blend of fact and fiction that makes for good story-telling. The children's version has little minds giggling as they think about the strange tummy noises Jonah must have heard while sloshing around the stomach of the big fish. The adult version might see this scene as a metaphor for a vast, deep place of spiritual wrestling. Suffice it to say, Jonah found himself in "The dark night of the soul," as written by the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross. As Jonah considered his situation, he said,

*Ocean gripped me by the  
throat.*

*The ancient Abyss grabbed me  
and held tight.*

*My head was all tangled in  
seaweed*

*at the bottom of the sea  
where the mountains take  
root.*

*I was as far down as a body  
can go,  
and the gates were slamming  
shut behind me forever—*

Jonah did what many of us do when we have hit the bottom of our barrel of tricks on 'how to get through life's little messes.' When all else fails: pray. And so, Jonah prayed. And as he prayed, he began to realize that what he has lost by making this decision to run away, was far more than the freedom he thought he was gaining by his clever move.

*'I've been thrown away,  
thrown out, out of your sight.  
I'll never again lay eyes on  
your Holy Temple.'*

Yet, Jonah did not give up. The deeper quest to be close again to his God began to build courage, and a desire to see the light of day again, to breathe deeply of the sunshine of the day, and even the will to begin to preach again, to heed the whispers of God; to be His servant once again.

*In trouble, deep trouble, I  
prayed to God.  
He answered me.*

Jonah returned to where he began, and started again. He caught the next camel caravan and headed to Nineveh. I'd like to tell you that there was a happy ending to this story, but there

isn't. Jonah had been correct in his first assumption of how his message would be received. And even after this wild and amazing tale at sea, the people of the day were no more responsive to Jonah's message than before. Jonah continued to struggle with his leadership and his temper over the matter.

But Jonah refused to give up again. He was given a second chance. And he took it. Jonah made a bad decision, but it did not make him a bad person. It made him a human being. Like you. And like me. We'd like to think that all our decisions are good ones, made with only the finest and most angelic intentions. But they are not always so pure. Sometimes, we make bad decisions, even with the best of intentions. Sometimes we are lazy or complacent, or do not listen or look carefully before we leap. Sometimes, we are too tired, and miss the cues.

When these things begin to take shape in our spiritual life, or in our church life, people, like those of Nineveh, are quick to point out our flaws and use our mistakes as reasons to justify why faith is

an old and tired concept, and why the church is a hypocritical institution. Yes.

Now that we've got that out of the way, I could also suggest to you that our churches are filled with Jonah's, who have decided to get off the boat and head for the camel train; Jonah's who let the criticism of the world wash off their backs; Jonah's who suffer 'dark nights of the soul' just like everyone else, but choose to cling to the life raft called faith; Jonah's who have come to understand, that when mistakes are made, Our God Believes in Second Chances.

*When my life was slipping  
away,  
I remembered God,  
And my prayer got through to  
you,  
made it all the way to your  
Holy Temple.*

God didn't give up on Jonah. He won't give up on you. Avoid large fish. And when all else fails, pray. Amen.