

Got a whale of a tale to tell you, friends, a whale of a tale for you. 'Bout a flappin' fish and a prophet of God who was runnin' away from Ninevan sod; a whale of a tale, and it's all true! I swear by Molly's tattoo!

Well, in case you haven't been with us the past couple of weeks, we are in the midst of a 6-week sermon series looking at the Old Testament book of Jonah. Jonah, we believe, was a prophet of God sometime around the 9th Century before Christ, and this book tells the amazing story of one of the most defining assignments of Jonah's prophetic career. Now if you're **Derek Jeter** of the New York Yankees, that defining moment might be hitting your 3,000th major league baseball hit, as he did back in early July. Or if you're **President Barak Obama**, that defining moment would probably be election to the Oval Office. But, for **Jonah** as we heard in Jonah Chapter 1, this career-defining assignment was an order from God to go to the great city of Nineveh and to cry out against its people for their wickedness before the Lord. You know, maybe something like... *"Ye people of Nineveh, listen and learn. Repent, me hardies, yo ho. Forty more days 'til you're overturned. Repent, me hardies, yo ho. Yo ho, yo ho, a prophet's life for me."*

OK, so it's a bit of a stretch from the original song, but how many of you really know all of the words to the Pirates version anyway? There's really only one part that everybody knows. Which is what? *"Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me."* Of course, Jonah wasn't a pirate. He was a prophet. So, for today we're going to sing that chorus a little differently. Today it'll go like this, *"Yo ho, yo ho, a prophet's life for me."* Together again: *"Yo ho, yo ho, a prophet's life for me."* You all are good. It's almost like we've done this before.

Now just to recap what we've learned about this prophet's life from the past two weeks, in Chapter 1 of Jonah's story, God told Jonah to go and cry out against the wicked people of the city of Nineveh, which was the capital of the powerful Assyrian empire. So naturally, Jonah, being a perfectly obedient servant of God, immediately did exactly what the Lord asked. Right? Yeah, not so much. Instead, as we know, Jonah jumped on a boat in a city called Joppa and set sail for the beautiful city of Tarshish, which was about as far away from Nineveh as he could possibly get. A trip to Tarshish, as we know from the old maps, was more than just a 3-hour tour. The trip to Tarshish was more like a 3-year tour. But nevertheless, the result for the ship and its crew were the same. Thanks to God's interest in getting Jonah back to his assignment, the weather started getting rough and that ship was getting tossed. So, after learning that Jonah's disobedience was the cause of the storm, the ship's crew eventually took Jonah's orders and tossed the prophet of God overboard and left him to sink to his death into the depths of the raging sea.

But, is that where the story of Jonah the prophet ends? Not at all. There's a whale of a tale and more still to come. And, this morning in Jonah Chapter 2, we're going to hear the words of Jonah's song, his prophet's anthem, as he is experiencing God's grace and salvation in a very fishy way. Are you ready to dive in?

The storm was a-ragin'. O, who could it be? Repent, me hardies, yo ho. By grace and power, He formed the seas. Repent, me hardies, yo ho. Here we go! "Yo ho, yo ho, a prophet's life for me."

So, let's look at the Good Book together, and we'll pick up the story of Jonah in **Chapter 1 at Verse 17**: **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. Now, can we just pause there for a moment? Because, I think that has to be one of the most remarkable plot shifts in Scripture. Do you ever have one of those moments

where something happens and all you can say is, “Boy, I gotta tell ya, I did not see that one coming”? This fishy submarine that God provides is an amazing reminder to me that, no matter how dire our circumstances may look, no matter how close to the end of our rope we may be, **we can never write God out of the equation.** Do you think that, as Jonah was sinking to his death, he was thinking, “If I just hold my breath long enough, eventually God’s going to send a whale to eat me, and I’ll just live in there, maybe write some songs, until I get back on track”? Only someone with the imagination of Lewis Carroll, Herman Melville, and J.K. Rowling combined might be able to come up with something like that. And, even if Jonah could have imagined it, I think Jonah had let the gravity of his sin overtake his hope in God’s grace. What Jonah had done by disobeying God and then telling his shipmates to toss him overboard was basically a way of saying to the Lord, “God, I’d rather die than do what you’ve asked me to do. I’d rather cease to exist than live into the grand adventure You’ve created me for.” And, I think that, when Jonah let the gravity of that finally sink in, he wrote God’s grace out of the equation for his life. Because who can imagine a God who still loves us even when we’ve shown him we’d rather do anything else than what He’s created us for, even if it means dying to prove it?

But, that’s why God is God and we are not. And, that’s the amazing in amazing grace. Isn’t it? It’s the life God offers superceding the death we’d otherwise chosen. It’s God surprising us with miraculous salvation even though we’ve done everything imaginable to show how undeserving we are. So, even though most people think of this story as Jonah and... the whale, what this story should really be called is Jonah and God’s Grace, because that’s what the great fish truly represents: grace in a rather fishy package. Maybe the song Jonah should have been singing is this: **“Amazing grace, it breeches now and strains me through baleen. I once was tossed, but now I’m found inside this whale’s belly.”**

Maybe you're in a time of running from God, of choosing death over life. For some of you, this might be a time of feeling like you're sinking beyond hope in dark and stormy waters. For others of you, maybe you've been swallowed up by grace but are still feeling the disorientation of life in a place you would have never imagined yourself ending up. Wherever you are on the journey of grace and transformation, I pray that you'll never lose your trust in the God who loves to surprise us with out-of-the-box grace. I pray that you'll remember not to write God out of the equation, because our Lord has promised to work all things together for good for those who love Him. When Scripture tells us that His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts and that all things are possible for God, it really means that *all* things are possible. And, I think there are times when God waits for us to exhaust all of our available resources so that, when the Lord sends a solution or brings us a blessing, there is nothing we can do but fall on our faces and give God praise for doing what we clearly couldn't have done without him. God's got some wonderful surprises up His sleeve, and I think, for Jonah, the great fish was an example of that. We can't write God out of the equation. Maybe that should be the next part of our prophet's anthem. ***The God of surprises has promises true. Repent, me hardies, yo ho! Turn back to the life He's promised for you. Repent, me hardies, yo ho! "Yo ho, yo ho, a prophet's life for me."***

Well, onto **Chapter 2. Beginning in verse 1**, we get front row seats for the recital of Jonah's anthem, his psalm to God. It reads like this: 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 forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.

One of the questions I always ask when I read a passage like this is, “How did this get written down?” Because, you gotta admit, a whale’s stomach is not the most natural setting for songwriting. Now, I have no doubt that God, through His Spirit, could easily communicate to any writer in history word-for-word what Jonah said in the belly of the fish. Or, it’s certainly possible that Jonah wrote it from memory after the fact, as he reflected on the events of his experience. Some scholars have also suggested that the poetry of Chapter 2 was added by a third party narrator who knew about Jonah’s story and had a psalm that expressed well what Jonah might have been thinking, something like Psalm 18, which says: **“The breakers of death surged round about me; the menacing floods terrified me. The cords of Sheol tightened; the snares of death lay in wait for me. In my distress I called out: Lord! I cried out to my God. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry to him reached his ears.”**

But, I think my favorite idea is that maybe there was another guy in there with him, who just happened to be swallowed with a lantern and a Ninth Century B.C. version of an iPad. And, while Jonah was singing his psalm, this guy was in another corner of the stomach writing it all down like, “Ooo, that’s good. If I ever get out of here, I’m gonna make sure this becomes Scripture.” Eventually, I think they met each other and shared a few pints and wrote some songs together. You know, “We all live in a blubber submarine, a blubber submarine, a blubber submarine. **We all live in a blubber submarine, a blubber submarine, a blubber submarine.**” That songs makes a lot more sense when you know its original context. Doesn’t it?

Regardless of the historical source, Jonah's prayer reminds us of another incredibly important truth about the love and the power of our God. **There is nowhere we can go where God's love and grace can't reach.** There is nowhere we can go that is too far away from God for His love and grace to reach us and bring us back into His care. In verse 2 of Jonah's psalm, as well as in the portion of Psalm 18 we heard, the writer mentions a place called Sheol. Sheol, in Hebrew culture, was a word used to describe the grave or the abyss, a place of darkness and death that was thought to be beyond the presence of God's light and salvation. And, it makes sense that Jonah would use that term, since I expect his experience of sinking into the sea because of his sin was literally about as close to an experience of Sheol as anyone could get. And yet, in Jonah's case, as well as in Psalm 18, the good news is that God heard his cry from Sheol and brought him back from the pit and restored his life.

I know that there are people in our lives, maybe some of us here, who feel like the choices they've made are beyond God's forgiveness. Maybe you know someone who feels like they've just drifted too far away from God for God to ever love them or ever desire to bring them back into His care. Or, maybe there's a part of your life that just feels too shameful or broken to believe that it could ever be restored, and so you continue to live with that sense of brokenness in your life and in your relationship with God. But, what we see in God's heart for Jonah, the heart of the Father for the prodigal son, is a willingness to heed the cry of a wayward soul and to raise it up to life again. And that graceful truth of God's heart is true for all of us, too. There is nowhere we can go where God's love and grace can't reach us to redeem us.

If you're in that place this morning, where you are needing God's love and grace to restore or redeem some broken part of your life, regardless of how embarrassing or hidden or shameful it might be, I want to encourage you this

morning, in the songs following the sermon, in your own silent prayer time, where ever it might be, to follow Jonah's example and to share your distress openly with God. God knows what's going on in your heart. That's why the psalmist writes, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there." God knows and is with us. But I believe God also desires for our internal monologues of brokenness to become conversations of redemption with Him. And in that process, the great words of Frederick Lehman's hymn, *The Love of God*, can become a reflection of God's work in you. Sing with me if you'd like: *"The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell. The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave His Son to win. His erring child, He reconciled and pardoned from his sin."*

Last piece for this morning. Look back at verses 7-10, where Jonah wraps up his prayer. To the Lord, he says, **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. (Or as other translations read, "They forsake the grace or the mercy that could be theirs.") **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.

First off, it's very cool to me that the Lord speaks whale. It's has a certain "Finding Nemo" vibe to it, don't you think? And, we see God's sovereignty here in the Lord's ability to communicate with all parts of His creation, even those under the sea. But, I think this part of the story makes a larger point about God's sovereignty, and I think it's that **God's sovereignty is bigger than human self-centeredness.** God's sovereignty is bigger than human self-centeredness.

Why do I say “self-centeredness? Well, look back at Jonah’s prayer. First of all, Verse 7 tells us that Jonah remembered God not because of a worshipful heart but because he realized he was about to die. Self-preservation kicked in, and in desperation, Jonah cried out to God. But, even more importantly, what Jonah cries out to God reflects a self-centered heart, too. From inside the whale, Jonah cries out, “Those who commit idolatry, they’ve turned their back on mercy. But, not me! Not me. I’m going to praise my God and do my part and bring the smack down on those wicked sinners. *Give me some time to blow the men down!*”

Even though Jonah was saying some great words, and even though it’s true that worshiping idols is bad and that deliverance belongs to the Lord, what concerns me is how quickly Jonah has turned back to condemning the Ninevites for their sin. He’d just received the most remarkable demonstration of grace he’ll probably ever experience, but the problem is that Jonah never let his appreciation of God’s grace in his own life mature into compassion for the brokenness in the lives of others. Let me say that again. **Jonah never let his appreciation of God’s grace in his own life mature into compassion for the brokenness in the lives of others.** Pastor Mike Ashcraft says it this way, “Jonah had a heart for God, but he never developed God’s heart.” Because, if he’d had God’s heart, he would have desired salvation for the people of Nineveh just like he wanted it for himself.

This, I think, is a temptation for anyone who’s been set free from some sort of sin. Once we’re clear and can look back, it’s so tempting to look down on those who are still struggling with the very thing God’s grace has just delivered us from. And, the sad thing is, those could be the very people God is calling us to share the good news with. Now, I know we may need some time to be away from the situations or people that were part of our temptations. But, what we have to be careful about is the condition and attitude of our hearts. **We can’t let ourselves forget where we’ve come from and the grace we’ve been shown.**

The thing that's so great about God's sovereignty in the face of human self-centeredness is seen in the fact that God still uses broken people to bring about His will. And, God's heart is more fixed on showing mercy and saving those who are lost than it is on getting bogged down by our self-centeredness. Despite Jonah's efforts, by the end of chapter 2, God is getting His way, and the prophet is back on track, on his way to Nineveh to cry out against its people. And, even though Jonah's heart is bent on their destruction, we'll see next week that God's heart prevails in bringing salvation to a city full of people whose lives were wicked, people not all that different from you and from me.

People of God, this story is not about a whale; it's about God's grace and His great heart. We serve a Lord who loves to surprise us with grace and who should never be written out of the equation, no matter what the circumstances. We serve a God whose love and grace can reach us no matter how far we might have wandered from His presence. And, we've been called as prophets to share the good news of the God whose sovereign heart beats stronger than our heart of self-centeredness. So, I pray that we might embrace the prophet's life God has called us to and live into the incredible adventure we've been made for so that this might be our song. *We follow the Lord who reigns from above. Take heart, me hearties, yo ho. We'll tell of His grace and show forth His love. Take heart, me hearties, yo ho. Yo ho, yo ho, a prophet's life for me. Yo ho, yo ho, a prophet's life for me.* Let's pray together.