before belief, and there is little hard evidence for Jonah’s tale. Maybe the doubt creeps in because Jonah’s story could do with a few more details. What kind of fish are we talking about here: is it a whale (if so, what kind) or a shark or was it some other kind of enormous deep-sea creature? Did Jonah suffer any side effects from his time in the whale? Did the whale suffer any side effects from swallowing Jonah? How did Jonah survive for three days inside the fish? Did Jonah learn to speak whale? Inquiring minds want to know!

As interesting as these questions are, however, they are the wrong questions! They are not relevant to the larger story of Jonah. In fact, there is too much significance made of the whale. The whale is not the central figure here; God is the central figure. God simply uses the whale as the means to save Jonah from drowning, so that Jonah can go and deliver God’s message to Nineveh. And yet, many people discredit Biblical stories like Jonah, or Noah and the Ark, or the Crucifixion of Jesus, because they cannot explain it or understand it with logical, rational, 21st-century means. They demand hard evidence, archaeological proof, or written records before they will believe God’s Word to be true.

How are we to take God’s Word when it contradicts our experience, breaks the laws of physics or defies logic? What are we to make of scripture that tells of worldwide floods, boats filled with animals, miraculous fish stories, and people raised from the dead? Can God’s Word be believed if it cannot be verified? If we believe one part of scripture, must we believe all parts? What about the parts that seem to contradict other parts? Why don’t the Gospel writers, who knew and talked and worked with Jesus, agree on the events of his life? Can the Bible really be trusted?

The short answer is, “Yes!” The Word of God is trustworthy and true, and at the same time it is beyond our comprehension! The Word of God must take pride of place in any God-centered life. God will nourish our spiritual lives through the private reading of God’s Word and the public hearing of God’s Word. So, I encourage you to ask your questions and give voice to your doubts, because God is greater than any question or doubt, and questions asked and doubts sincerely raised are part of the ongoing dialogue with God. Don’t be surprised if the pastor doesn’t have all the answers, or the answers come many years from now: God reveals God’s Self according to God’s timetable and God’s plan, not ours. But I will promise you this: as you study God’s Word, a transformation will begin to take place in your life.

At the heart of Jonah’s story is the remarkable account of how a pagan city is transformed by the preaching of God’s Word. Jonah’s adventure began with the words, “The word of the LORD came to Jonah” (1:1). Then, after his dramatic rescue by the fish and his pledge to do as God commanded, we are told that “the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time” (3:1). This second command to Jonah is the same as the first: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you” (3:2). And that message is still unchanged: “preach against [Nineveh], because its wickedness has come up before me” (1:2). Jonah is sent to Nineveh to warn them that God’s judgement is coming because of their evil ways. God sends Jonah to give the same bad news to the same bad people, because God still loves the people of Nineveh and God still hopes they will repent and mend their wicked ways.

A few things about the Word of God. First, “all scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16), which means it is not written by Moses or David or Isaiah or Jonah. God breathed out God’s Word and spoke it through the apostles and prophets. Scripture is how God makes God’s Self known to us; it is God’s Self-revelation for us. This makes the Bible different from any other book.

Second, prophets like Jonah and apostles like Peter receive God’s Word through God’s Spirit. Peter writes: “No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke of God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21). Peter relates a story about a time when Paul journeyed as a prisoner, by ship to Rome. Paul’s ship encountered a storm. The Gospel-writer Luke, traveling with Paul, records, “the ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along” (Acts 27:15). The word Luke uses for the ship being “driven along” by the wind is the same word Peter uses for the prophets being “carried along” by the Spirit. The Spirit controlled the direction of the ship and controls the words of the prophets.

Third, God’s Word transforms people. The story of Jonah’s ministry in Nineveh is a marvelous example of how God changes people through God’s Word. “The word of the LORD came to Jonah” (1:1): he received the Word and was driven along by it. He went to Nineveh and proclaimed God’s Word; and when the people heard God’s Word, they believed God, called on God’s mercy, and gave up their evil and violent ways. God’s Word brought faith, it produced repentance in 120,000 people who had no prior interest in God. God’s Word achieved a remarkable transformation!

It’s clear to me that Jonah told the people of Nineveh the extraordinary story of God’s grace in his own life, and that God used what had happened to Jonah to begin the transformation in the lives of the Ninevites. I believe this for two reasons. First, the king of Nineveh said, “Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (3:9). Where did the king get that idea? If all Jonah told him was, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed” (3:4), which was the original message, why would the king have any reason to hope in the mercy and compassion of God? But if the king knew Jonah’s story, he would have reason to say, “If God saved Jonah, perhaps God will have compassion on us, too.”

The second reason I believe Jonah told them his story is this: when Jesus applied the story of Jonah, he said, “As Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation” (Luke 11:30). Jonah, the man himself, was a sign of God’s compassion and redemption to the Ninevites. Jesus goes on to say: “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:39-40). As Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so Jesus is a sign for us of God’s grace and mercy and compassion and love, which are available to all who call upon God’s name.

When Jonah proclaimed the Word of God, he must have preached with a special passion born from his own experience. God’s judgment was coming to Nineveh, and the man who announced it had experienced that judgment in his own life, and yet, he had also discovered God’s mercy. One of the greatest things about our God is that God uses people like us, flawed messengers who experienced God’s grace, to teach us about God’s love. God will use us, our life experiences, to reach others. God never wastes a thing: God will use our failures, our traumas, our shame, and the most desperate moments of our life to advance the Gospel.

When Jonah spoke God’s Word, the Ninevites knew that God spoke directly to them. They heard Jonah; they believed God. The Holy Spirit gave weight to the Word and, through the living power, God changed the hearts of people who had no previous interest in the things of God. The simplicity of what Jonah did in speaking God’s Word is striking; the power of what God did through God’s Word is astounding.

Most Christians believe that the Bible is God’s Word, but many are not yet convinced that the Bible does God’s work. King David had a higher view of Scripture. *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.* (Ps. 19:7-8)

David believed not only that God’s Word is perfect, trustworthy, right and radiant, but that God uses God’s Word to revive the soul, shed wisdom, give joy to the heart and light to the eyes. If you are inclined to think of the Bible primarily as information or as fairytale or legend, please think again. God’s Word is food for the soul and medicine for the spirit. It is life-transforming power available to you, from the God who loves you more than you know. Accepting the truth of God’s Word and being open to its power is a sure way to begin living a God-centered life. And that’s no fish story!

Prayer: Almighty God, empower us to tell the gospel story, to recount your wondrous deeds, which shine light on your glorious and holy character. Lord Jesus, inspire us to announce the good news that you have brought the Kingdom near, given your life for our sins, and been raised exalted as Lord over all creation. Holy Spirit, encourage us to live in the light of the gospel, declaring its truth with our words, and embodying this truth through our actions. Give us love for you and for each other. Amen.

Sources:

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**Believe God’s Word**

Sunday, July 16, 2017 Jonah 1: 17; 3:1-10

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

From the archives of the British Admiralty comes the story of James Bartley, who went to sea in 1891 aboard the whaling ship *Star of the East*. The crew harpooned a whale 200 miles east of the Falkland Islands, and Bartley joined sailors in one of the longboats as they sought to slay the mighty beast. As the whale thrashed about, desperately trying to free itself, Bartley pitched overboard, lost to the wind and the waves. The whale swam away. Soon after the wind died, the *Star of the East* sat becalmed for many hours. Sometime later, the whale, now dead, floated to the surface. As sailors worked to dissect the whale carcass, they saw movement: the ship’s surgeon cut open the whale’s stomach, revealing James Bartley alive, but unconscious.

Once revived, Bartley described his fifteen-hour ordeal in the whale’s stomach. He recounted how he treaded water until the jaws of the whale engulfed him from below, vividly describing the whale’s “teeth” scrapping across his skin and the sliminess of the throat as he slid down into the stomach. He could breathe he said, but the hot, fetid air and the overpowering smell soon overwhelmed him and he fainted.

Although he survived, James Bartley lost all the hair on his body and this ordeal bleached his skin white. Bartley also lost his sight, remaining blind for the rest of his life. Not surprisingly, Bartley never went to sea again, setting up shop as a cobbler in his native Gloucester, England. James Bartley died eighteen years after his remarkable survival. On his tombstone is a brief account of his experience at sea, with the footnote: “James Bartley, 1870-1909, A Modern Jonah.” The Admiralty maintains the truth of Bartley’s amazing adventure inside the whale, based on the eyewitness accounts of his fellow other sailors.

Bartley’s story is astonishing, but it isn’t the only whale tale on record. Jake Fraser claims a whale (or a whale shark) tried to swallow him as he kayaked off the coast of Alaska, but spat him out as too hard to digest. Fraser’s cousin saw the whole thing. Spanish fisherman Luigi Marquez fell overboard in a storm, where he claims a whale swallowed him. He survived by eating raw fish and using the light from his watch to see, before the whale evacuated him back into the ocean 72 hours after being swallowed. The Spanish Coast Guard verified much of Marquez’s story.

Most people find the stories of James Bartley, Jake Fraser, and Luigi Marquez incredible, but ultimately trustworthy based on the number of eyewitness accounts. Not so the story of Jonah. There is great skepticism and doubt as to the veracity of Jonah’s claim to be swallowed by a fish sent from God. Maybe that skepticism stems from our post-Enlightenment minds, which are accustomed to proof