

believing, and repenting. **Awakening** means realizing God is laying hold of your life in a new way. Jonah's sleeping on the boat was a symptom of the spiritual lethargy that crept over his inner life. Once he'd walked with God, but something went wrong in Jonah's heart. The readiness of his early years, a readiness to serve God anywhere, anytime, in anything gave way to a more calculating form of service. Jonah set terms and posted conditions on his service to God. There were limits to what Jonah was willing to do for God.

Spiritual decline often happens so slowly that you hardly notice. Worship becomes remote, prayer becomes repetitive, and the Christian life runs as on auto pilot. We cease being actively engaged heart, mind and soul. When this happens, cynicism, resentment and unbelief begin to grow, like weeds in a garden, but it happens so slowly we hardly notice we are sleepwalking our way through life. That's where Jonah found himself until God intervened through the raging storm, the tumbling dice, and the pounding waves.

Jonah says of God, "YOU hurled me into the deep. YOUR waves swept over me" (2:3). Awakening from his spiritual slumber, Jonah recognized God's hand in the painful events of his life, the first sign of a genuine change in Jonah's heart. When Jonah says, "Your waves swept over me," he is not complaining as if God were treating him unfairly; he is confessing his sin before God. Jonah found himself in the water because of his own sinful choices; there he admits his sinful condition to God. Prayer begins with an awakening in which you own and confess your true position before God, remembering that God owes you nothing.

When God awakens us, the immediate danger is the temptation to despair. When we feel the weight of our sin or the helplessness of our situation, darkness can set in and hope can quickly die. But it is when the pounding of the waves begin to take their toll that **believing** begins. Notice the timing: Jonah began to pray "from inside the fish" (2:1). Jonah thanked God for his deliverance, but he also reflected back on his experience in the water. It was in the water that Jonah said, "I have been banished from your sight" (2:4), and it was in the water that he said, "yet I will look again toward your holy temple" (2:7).

This might seem like a small point, but I think it is important: when Jonah struggled in the water he felt sure he would die, but when he prayed in the fish he felt sure he would live. The belly of the fish was not a place of trauma for Jonah: it was a place of deliverance. Despite the strangeness of the means, Jonah knew God would save him, and so he worshipped God with thanksgiving, and declared salvation comes from the Lord (2:9).

Once awakened, Jonah had a desire to pray, but he still felt it to be impossible because his heart condemned him. Jonah felt he was beyond forgiveness and hope. Jonah felt the distance between him and God. But Jonah's despairing thought is not his only one. Faith rises within him, and he says, "As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple" (2:7). This is a marvelous statement of faith in God, of beginning to believe even in the midst of great struggle.

Jonah didn't find it easy to trust God when he struggled in the water. His faith came out of a great struggle between his own feelings of failure and the gracious promises of God. Faith prevails over despair when we fix our eyes on the grace of God rather than on our own failure. When Jonah looked at himself, he despaired, but he dared to believe that there is hope in God. Jonah found that hope by looking away from himself and his failures, and fixing his eyes on God and God's grace.

Jonah's struggle for faith in the water is one of the great moments in the extraordinary drama of his life. His experience shows the shallowness of the idea that salvation means getting your act together through some moral effort, good works, family values, the Ten Commandments, and maybe believing in Jesus along the way. God saves us precisely because we cannot save ourselves. God sent the fish because Jonah had no other hope. What Jonah needed was not a belief, but a deliverance; not a creed, but a Savior.

This leads to **repentance**. Repentance doesn't mean beating up on yourself. Nor is repentance a single moment when you give your life to Christ. Repentance is the Holy Spirit continually making us more like Jesus. We never grow to the point where we are done repenting. Repentance means change: change in what you think, change in what you desire, and a change in what you do and say. Repentance as change is evidence of authentic faith.

Jonah repented inside the fish. He made choices and commitments that reflected the change God brought to his heart. The man who set out for Tarshish, now saw the dream of a self-determined life to be an idol that caused him to miss what God offered him. Jonah released the idol of his self-governed life, and made a new pledge of obedience to God: "What I have vowed I will make good" (2:9).

Some people think repentance is the gateway to God's grace, that repentance comes before faith, and we must abandon our sins in order to believe. But if God required

repentance *before* we come to faith, then we would have to do it under our own power, which just isn't possible! Where would we find the inclination and the ability to change? Faith is the bond of a living union with Jesus. The good news is that God does not ask us to change so that we can come to Christ. God invites us to come to Christ so that we can change. Repentance is a gift of God (Acts 11:18). It flows from faith, and faith flows from a spiritual awakening to our own need and to God's glory. The repentance that Jonah could not find in the boat was God's gift to him in the fish. God's grace make repentance possible. Jonah, who rejected God's call, who refused to pray on the ship, and who felt banished from God in the water, found repentance in the fish and began to worship: "I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you" (2:9).

Putting these pieces together, we begin to see that a profound change is taking place in Jonah's life. Jonah saw his dream become an idol which needed to be smashed so his hands would be free to receive what God offered him. The stubborn heart that ran from God was changing. A new love, freedom, and joy in God rose up in Jonah's soul. A new desire to honor, serve and obey God flowed from God's grace into Jonah, and he received it in faith. By grace, through faith, in Christ: that's how real and lasting change happens, and that's where prayer begins. Prayer does not give you the power to dictate the outcome of events. Prayer is the means by which you appropriate God's grace for the circumstances of life that you face. When life seems out of control, prayer keeps in tune with the One who controls everything.

Prayer: God, You are speaking to me! Break through my slumbering. Break through my apathy. Break my self-centeredness. Break the veil over my mind. Quicken my hearing! Quicken my seeing! Quicken my desires for You. Awaken my zeal for You. Awaken my love for Your purposes. Awaken my desires for Your Kingdom to come here as in heaven. I love You, LORD. Help me carry that into my everyday activities. Awaken to me, my LORD and my GOD. Amen

Source Material: This sermon series draws heavily on Colin Smith's book, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow. 2012.

## Ask for God's Help

**Sunday, July 9, 2017**

**Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

### **Jonah 2**

Some days it's tough to pray. Some days we're too tired, too worn out to pray. Or the words just won't come. Or we're angry or upset with God, and we don't want to pray. Or all we can muster is a one-word prayer: Help! The story of Jonah is the story of a God-fearing man who stopped praying; and having stopped, didn't know how to get started again.

After God exposed Jonah's secret sin, Jonah received a revelation from God that the storm would cease if the crew threw him into the water. Jonah spoke to the crew about God. He preached and he prophesied, although he could not bring himself to pray. But a great transformation took place when Jonah hit the water. God broke through the barriers that locked Jonah in despair. Hope was born and out of that hope, Jonah began to pray.

I always pictured God sending the great fish to rescue Jonah as soon as he hit the water. But a closer study of the story convinces me that it probably wasn't like that. When he first hit the water, Jonah worked hard to stay afloat, but the current kept pulling him under. Bobbing up and down, fighting for air and for his life, Jonah managed to catch a breath, only to find another wave crashing over him, and it wasn't long before Jonah went under. When, as Jonah says, "To the roots of the mountains I sank down" (2:6), he clearly means he was no longer above the waves. When Jonah hit bottom, had no way out, no strength left to swim, and no hope of survival, that's when God sent the fish.

Jonah had to take a pounding before he could open up to God. His resentment towards God formed a hard crust around Jonah's heart, and it took an extraordinary intervention to break the stronghold of his resistance to God. God had a great future in store for Jonah, but none of it would have happened if it had not been for the raging storm, the tumbling dice, and the pounding waves. Under God's almighty hand these were the means by which Jonah was brought to a place where, at last, he cried out to God for help. From inside the fish, Jonah started to pray.

Prayer is how we talk to God. Living a God-centered life requires constant communication with God, and prayer is brought to birth through a continuing process of awakening,