

“White Flag—Distress Call”

Today we're continuing the series Pastor Mark started last week called White Flag. We're studying this little book in the Old Testament, this character of Jonah. I think one of the problems with Jonah is that a lot of us think we know the story of Jonah but we don't really. Typically we associate Jonah with one other character. If you ask somebody, they will think of it as the story of Jonah and the whale. The whale's name is Monstro and Jonah is running away from Geppetto and wants to be a real boy and...we get a little fuzzy about that point.

The Word of God comes to Jonah to go to Nineveh, this foreign city of Israel's enemies, and tell them about God's love. Jonah doesn't want to do that, and so he gets on a ship going to Tarshish...opposite direction. So God sends a storm, the ship is going down. Jonah says, "Throw me over the side," and these pagan sailors get converted and start worshiping the God of Israel. Jonah goes over the side of the boat, the storm stops. Jonah's going into the sea, and he thinks he's going to die.

Last week Pastor Mark told us a story when he tried to run away from home as a kid. Hearing his story made me remember one of my own. I was probably 7 or 8 and I decided to run away. I don't exactly know why. We lived a couple miles outside of town on a pretty busy two-lane highway. I made a bed roll out of a couple of blankets. I packed up some snacks. I had a canteen full of sweet tea, some money in my pocket and I headed north along highway 13. I didn't get very far. Just beyond the row of houses we lived in was a cemetery. I made it to the cemetery and sat down at the side of the road and decided to stick out my thumb and hitch-hike. I wasn't really serious about it. I kind of remember thinking that I was practicing for a later time when I would really make my big escape.

It took about 10 seconds with my thumb out and a guy on a Harley pulled over. Big guy, black helmet, long ponytail trailing down his back. I panicked! I remember my heart jumping into my throat and asking myself, "What did you think you were doing. Now you're really in trouble!" The man asked me if I was far from home. I told him, no, I was just pretending to run away. That I lived just down the road. He told me I should probably go home. I was glad to. He said he'd follow me there, to make sure. He did. He even talked to my parents! I was so embarrassed; so glad to be home. For Jonah it was a fish. For me, a big scary dude on a Harley.

I never ran away from home again. But I did run away from God. In college I questioned everything. My faith. My calling to ministry. Myself. My future. So my Junior year of college I went to Japan. I got on the plane and pretty much said, "God, if you're real and you want me. Come and get me." He did.

We all have a little runner in us at some point. Mark did a great job of calling us all to look at what we're running from and to identify how we hide. Today let's take another few steps into Jonah's story and how his story might intersect with yours and mine. The sailors on the boat toss Jonah overboard in order to calm the storm. Jonah is sinking into the sea, but the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

This word "provided" could be translated "commissioned." It's what a king would do if he was going to appoint an ambassador or a messenger or something. It's something that you do to a person, but it's used here for a fish, and the picture is kind of God saying, "Hey Fish..." The fish saying, "Yes, Lord?" God saying, "Go pickup Jonah. Directions will be given on a need-to-know basis. This is important: Swallow, don't chew... I'll tell you where to drop him off." The fish says, "Okay, Lord." God appoints this fish. It's really an odd kind of story.

I want to pause here and touch on something Mark brought up last week. Don't get hung up on the feasibility of a man being swallowed by a big fish and staying alive inside for 3 days. Whether you look at this story literally or metaphorically, the point is still there. Don't get hung up on the fish and miss the point. Because in this book, the point really is a spiritual message that God is up to something great.

In fact, the primary word associated with God in the story of Jonah, is the word 'great.' It starts by God saying to Jonah, "**I want you to go to the great city of Nineveh**", because it turns out that God has a great heart, because it turns out God has a heart for the great city. Then Jonah runs the other way, so the Bible says God sends a *great* wind, and it produces a *great* storm. Then these pagan sailors or converted through a

great fear. Then God appoints a fish for Jonah. Does anybody want to guess what adjective the Bible uses to describe the fish? It is a *great* fish. God is doing something *great* in the story.

Jonah, on the other hand, messes everything up gets a different word. If the main word for God in this book is 'great,' the main word for Jonah, is the word 'down.' Jonah is going *down*. God says, "Go to Nineveh," and Jonah goes *down* to Joppa, this port city. Then he goes in a ship *down* to Tarshish. Then, in the ship, he goes *down* into the hold...the bottom of ship when he's sleeping. Then he goes *down* into the water in the storm. Then he goes *down* into the fish. Jonah has hit bottom. You see, because with the Israelites, you don't get lower. The sea was a place of fear, terror, a place of death.

I hear people's stories of hitting bottom a lot. In fact, usually by the time somebody calls me, they're at the bottom. They've gone down, down, down. The man who bargained his life away in bad business deals and it was all crashing down around him--bottom. A number of people who have literally gambled away everything--bottom. The woman who'd been taking her husband for granted for years and he'd had enough and walked out--bottom. The man who had a warrant out for his arrest and was so tired of hiding and looking over his shoulder. He asked me to take him to the police station so he could turn himself in—bottom. The young woman who'd been so proud of her sexual prowess, and now was feeling an emotional crush that was pulling her deeper and deeper into darkness after an abortion—bottom. Jonah's story is your story, or the story of someone you know--bottom.

So, what does Jonah do in the fish from the bottom? He prays. He said, "**In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave, I called for help, and you listened to my cry**" (Jonah 2:2). Jonah hits bottom, physically, emotionally, and spiritually and prays.

From the story it seems like Jonah had gone a long time without honestly praying to God. He had gotten this word to go to Nineveh. He goes down to Joppa. He doesn't pray about going to Joppa. He gets on a ship to Tarshish. He doesn't pray about the ship. He is not talking to God at all, not honestly. Until...he ends up in the sea in a fish. Why do you think Jonah prayed in the fish? He had nothing better to do! Think about it, what else are you going to do in a fish? I'll tell you kind of a humbling thing: Do you know why in our world we so often have a hard time praying? Because we have so many other things to do! We have so many crutches, so many screens that we can turn on, so much noise we can produce that we don't have to face what's going on in our minds. That is, until we're at the bottom.

So Jonah is at that bottom. He's dissed God, he's gone through this storm, been thrown into the sea, swallowed by a fish. Jonah goes as low as you can go...and at the bottom he discovers...there is God. This is part of his prayer... Jonah 2..."**The engulfing waters threatened me. The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head... When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord. My prayers rose to you**" (Jonah 2:5, 7).

Now here's something to think about. I mean, Jonah knows that he's done the wrong thing. He's prophet! His job his whole life has been to point out wrong things and help people make course corrections. But at what point in this story do you think Jonah repented? At what point do you think he was like, "OK. I get it. I'm ready to do this your way because it's the best way." Do you think it was maybe day two inside the fish? Or maybe the afternoon of day three? Maybe late into the first night? I think it was when they went, "A one and a two..." And then one guy says, "Wait, wait. Do we throw **on** three or **after** three?" And they start over... "A one..." And Jonah's thinking, "Uh-oh!" They hurl him into the air, and I think that before he ever hit the water he's already repented. "God, I repent! I'll go to Nineveh, I'll go to Narnia—I go to both! I go wherever you send me; I'll stay as long as you want." All before he hit the water!

Jonah's all, "I won't do it again." And he meant it. But a key lesson here is that God is not going to immediately stop the chaos and consequences. Experts with kids all agree. One of the worst things you can do as a parent is shield your kids from the consequences of their actions. Do that often enough when they are young and you doom them to living lives of misery. Because they begin to believe that there are no consequences to their actions. And then they are utterly shocked and broken and disoriented when they face the real world and real consequences.

My parents knew this and let my brother and I suffer the natural consequences of our actions. Whether that was physical punishment or the loss of privileges, or whatever. When I got caught I repented fully at that moment, but my parents did not take the consequences away. Most of the time, when we run from God, when we do the wrong thing, when we sin blatantly and get caught, God's not going to take away the consequences. But this is really important. God allows the consequences to run their course, but it's not about pay back, it's about the win-back, the bring-back. God allows the consequences to happen so that we connect the dots, so that we remember. Jonah says, "In the middle of the consequences of my actions, I remembered..."

What did he remember? That God's way works. That God's way is the way to life. That God's way isn't to spoil our fun, but to make life full. He remembered that God's plans have a point, a purpose, and goodness, a joy to them. He remembered God's love. In the middle of our consequences we can remember too. The consequences, time in the belly of the fish, give us time to remember.

So Jonah comes to realize that what looked so bad...hitting bottom... the wind, the storm, getting thrown overboard, swallowed by a fish...was actually the best thing that ever happened to him because it brought him back to God, and God was doing great things.

By the way a little time out here. Has anybody here ever been in over your head in life? Pray. Is it your own fault? Pray anyway. Not been crossing all the t's, dotting all the i's. Pray anyway. Are you concerned, because the honest truth is, right now even if you were to pray, your motives are kind of mixed and you're really more concerned about your own well-being than you are about God's will? Pray anyway.

God is never more than a prayer away. One of the amazing things about God is he is so gracious. That even when Jonah, you, or I come to him just because we hit bottom and we have no place else to go, God says, "It's still okay, come to me, come to me, come to me." Go to him. Jonah does, and God hears, and Jonah gets delivered.

Jonah gets delivered on the third day. Now the third day is a big day in Bible stories. In the Old Testament, often when there was a dramatic rescue on the part of God, it would come on the third day. Jonah 2:10, "**And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land**" (Jonah 2:10). Yup. It says "vomited." Boys love this part of the story. Vomit makes every story better—if you're a boy!

The writer wants to make sure the reader gets this. Jonah did not get dropped off by an angel, or by a fiery chariot, or a beam of light. The whale tossed his cookies, lost his lunch, launched the food shuttle, took a ride on the regurgitron...okay?

Jonah ends up on the shore, as John Ortberg puts it, "Not a tragic figure, covered with suffering. Not a heroic figure, covered with glory. A ridiculous figure, covered with shrimp cocktail and tuna tartare, or whatever it is the great fish had eaten." There's a reason why the writer says this, and the reason is important. Jonah thinks he is going to drown, and God sends a fish, like an Enterprise rental car pickup/delivery thing for him. And the point of all of this is that Jonah thought he was dead, gone, done for. This is the worst.

It turns out that when human beings are going down, down, down...God is up to something great, and from God's perspective, death and the grave are not a problem at all. God wants us to know that these things (death, rebellion, consequences, chaos) they don't get the last word. Jonah ends up getting vomited onto the shore. It's a rebirth of sorts. The regurgitation scene tells us that Jonah is the story of God's grace, how he's with us through the consequences, how he redeems our rebellion, how he uses the chaos we create and can bring something good from it.

And the story of Jonah points to another character. Check this out. Jonah, the J-man, we are told, is from a town called Gath-hepher, which is a few miles away from Nazareth. Does anybody remember another prophet, another J-man, who came from Nazareth? Jonah was asleep on a boat in a storm when everybody else on the boat panicked and woke him up and by his actions, the storm is stilled. Does that remind you of anybody else in the Bible? Jonah's name means, "the dove," which is a name that means, "was given to a beloved one." Does anybody else remember someone who went down into the water, came up out of the water, and a dove descended, and a voice says, "This is my beloved Son..."

Jesus said toward the end of his life...he had one sign to give this sorry tragic world, and he called it the sign of 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" (Matthew 12:40). And then comes the third day.

See, the message of Jonah is a little foretaste of Jesus. Jesus comes to meet us at the lowest place and says, "Death loses, sin loses, loss loses, sorrow loses, sadness loses...joy wins." **"Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Grave, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).** This is the story of Jonah. It points us to Jesus.

Jonah hits bottom, and there, God is greater than ever before. So what do we do now? When we are in over our heads, we pray. We understand that God is not about payback. God is about the win-back, the bring-back. There's a Jonah who is a lawyer. He was on the ship of Tarshish, had a lot of cash, and he was living for a lot more. His sea was a sea of alcohol. He could not stay away from alcohol. He just kept going down and down and down and down. The managing partner of his law firm told him at one point, "Your next bender will be the last one you ever take when you work for this firm."

For a couple of months, he stayed sober. Then he was at a conference, blew off the meetings. They found him in his hotel room. He had been on a binge, drinking for three days. Just out of control. He lost his job. He got put into a rehab clinic for a month, got assigned a sponsor who told him that he would have to get up every morning at six o'clock for an AA meeting. His response was, "No way am I getting up at six o'clock in the morning to meet with a bunch of drunks." His sponsor said, "You're not just going to meet with them; you're going to get up earlier and fix coffee for those drunks." Kind of a tough sponsor.

Somebody said that the one difference between a therapist, who is generally gentler, and a sponsor, is the only time a sponsor says the word 'closure' is before the word 'mouth.' You have to think about that for just a moment. This guy finds Jesus in that group, and he is delivered. His life is saved, and his marriage is saved. He goes down as far as he can go, and to his great surprise, going down to the bottom is the greatest thing that ever happened to him because there, he meets God, and God is doing something great.

A friend several years ago was diagnosed with cancer. He was a father of young children. I walked with him through his cancer. He got better, then, it came back with a vengeance. We talked a lot. He knew when it was time. He wasn't bitter. He didn't feel cheated. He talked about the blessing his life had been, how awesome it was that he got to be the father of two great kids, the husband of a wonderful wife. He got to see so many things, make so many friends. He was grateful he got to live such a wonderful life. I did his funeral. It was a massive celebration of life. It's what he wanted. His deliverance came on the other side of death. He got to the bottom and there God was.

That's the story of Jonah. And that's your life...if you want it. That is the sign of Jonah. Jesus comes and says, "If you'll let me, I'll meet you at the cross. I'll meet you at the tomb. And the third day is coming, if you'll meet me." And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Senior Pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, and Rev. Andy Stanley, Senior Pastor of Northpoint Community Church, for their resources in this message.