

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Jonah 1:17-2:10 **“Where We Learn To Pray”**

November 23, 2014
(24th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IC: JONAH 1:17-2:10
"WHERE WE LEARN TO PRAY"

Jonah 2// Ex. 14-15 (19 Verbal Parallels)

1) v.17 JONAH SWALLOWED BY THE WHALE (DIVINE TRANSPORTATION).

New Setting, Sees Commission Preferable To Judgment

N.D. **a) v.17a Lord's Appointment Of A Fish.** Is. 1:3, Jer. 8:7, Hos. 8:8, Sign Phase Of Commissioning

17 And the **LORD** (Yahweh) appointed a **great fish** to swallow up Jonah; **Antithesis Of The Ship, /Appoint 4:6, 7, 8**
Creation Obeys! Instrument Of Salvation, Re-direction

b) v.17b Fish's Action And Jonah's Fate, Limit Named.

Jonah Needs Mercy, Change Of Heart

Now Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. **Gen. 22:4, Ex. 15:22, Hos. 6:1-2, Three Day Retreat**
Psalm Written After Event, Journey Down To Death

2) 2:1-9 JONAH'S PRAYER: A PSALM OF THANKS (NOT A LAMENT).

//4:1-4

No Admission Of Guilt! Request For Forgiveness! Shallow Jonah

a) vv.1-6 Stanza No. 1: The Predicament (Tomb/Womb).

PSALMS (15) FORM

Sheol = Realm Of Chaos/Death

1 Then Jonah prayed to the **LORD** his God from the belly (womb) of the fish, saying, **PROCLAMATION 1)**

D.D. **v.2 = Report Of 1st Prayer**

2 1 "I called to the LORD out of *my distress*, and he answered me. **18:6, 120:1 SUMMARY 2)**
 2nd person out of *the belly of Sheol* I cried (screamed) *and thou didst hear my voice.* **18:4-5, 31:22b**

Mariners As Agents, God As Actor: 1:4a, 5c, 15b)

3 2a For thou didst cast (fling) me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, **CRISIS RECALLED 3)**

1st person b and the flood was round about me; **Taste Of Justice First, Severe Judgment**

c *all thy waves and billows passed over me.* **42:7 Death's Door**

4 3 Then I said, 'I am cast out *from thy presence*; **139:7 Sheol To Temple!**

How shall I look *upon THY HOLY TEMPLE?* **5:7 Jerusalem**

5 2' c' *The waters closed in over me,* **69:2 Near-Death**

b' the deep was round about me; weeds (reeds) were wrapped around my head

6 a' at the roots of the mountains. **Low Point, Earth's Pillars, Antithesis Of Exodus**

v.6c = Great Reversal, // Jesus Death, Resurrection

1' I **went down (x4)** to the land whose bars closed over me forever; **Journey Ends, Gates, Prison, Mt. 16:18**

*yet thou didst bring my life up from the Pit, O LORD, my God.** **30:3, 16:10 DELIVER 4)**

Ps. 139:7-8, Is. 25:8, Death Imminent, Experience Mercy!

b) vv.7-9 Stanza No. 2: Solution- Contrast And Deliverance.

Partial Response To Grace

D.D. **Amnesia Of God**

7 1a When *my soul fainted within me,* **142:3**

2nd person b I remembered the **LORD**; **Gen. 8:1 (Noah)**

1st person 2 and my prayer came to thee, *into THY HOLY TEMPLE,* **18:6 CRY FOR HELP 5)**

Compares Himself With Idolaters: Pride? Superiority?

8 2' *Those who pay regard to vain idols* **31:6-7 Crew Members?**

forsake their true loyalty (their experience of mercy). **Doesn't See 1:16**

Big Promise, Not A Favorable Comparison!

9 1'a *But I with the voice of thanksgiving* will sacrifice to thee; **116:17 VOWS & PRAISE**

what I have vowed I will pay. **116:18 Great Piety!**

Key b *Deliverance belongs to the LORD!*^{!* (A Shift?)} **3:8 v.6c // v.9c**

What Jonah Shouts, He Then Experiences! Fish Nauseated By Jonah!

1') v.10 JONAH (THE INDIGESTIBLE PROPHET!) VOMITED FORTH BY THE FISH.

Through Waters To Dry Land For A Witness To God = Personal Exodus

N.D. **a) v.10a The Lord's Word To The Fish.** **No Combat With Sea Or Leviathan: Canaanite Mythology**

10 And the **LORD** spoke to the **fish**, **End Of The Retreat, Rescue From Death, Delivered From The Fish**

Restored Through Difficult Circumstances

b) v.10b Fish's Action And Jonah's Fate.

//Mt. 12:40-41, Romans 8:38-39, Humorous Touch

and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. **Humiliation, Negative Image, Jer. 48:26, Lev. 18:25-28**

The Real Issue Is 4:11, Salvation = Accept God's Call, Both Stanzas End With A Climax (*)

WHERE WE LEARN TO PRAY

"...and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

Jonah's enforced retreat.

J O N A H 1 : 1 7 b

Isaac Singer once confessed, "Whenever I am in trouble, I pray. And since I'm always in trouble, I pray a lot..."¹ These *Jonah-like* words ring true to most of us because pain and prayer often go together, not always, but often. C.S. Lewis got it right when he wrote in his book *The Problem of Pain*:

"We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."²

Not that God doesn't work in the flourishing middle of life, but that at the thin edges we are more aware of our raw need for God and the help that comes from above. So it was with Jonah and his later day counterpart, Roy Ahmaogak.

Born in Barrow Alaska in 1898, his mother an unmarried Inupiat Eskimo, his father a Portuguese whaler whom he never met. "When I was born," he later reflected, "our people thought a woman was unclean when she gave birth. When the time came for my mother to deliver me, she was taken out of her warm sod house and put inside a small snow igloo." During the next four days, food and water were handed in through a tiny opening. His nine older brothers and sisters all died young, so, in his mother's eyes, Roy was special.

¹ Quoted in Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 73.

² www.goodreads.com/quotes/422142

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Presbyterian missionaries came to Barrow when Roy was a child; his mother and adopted father were among the first believers. His mother was certain God was calling her son to the ministry. Roy recognized this call but was more interested in going on exciting hunts with his dogs. When a missionary doctor invited Roy to accompany him and preach the gospel on his distant rounds, Roy shrunk from what he knew to be the Lord's voice. He fled to an isolated fish camp on the Beaufort Sea. Here he could hide from God and enjoy the excitement of seal hunts with his friends. One successful hunt carried them far out onto the ice with their dogs.

As evening approached they headed home, but the wind had changed directions. They were headed into a blinding blizzard, facing the most dreaded terror of all: being caught on an island of ice. Late the next day they reached the landward side and found what Roy most feared- open sea. For the next three days their lives hung in the balance. Would they drift and freeze to death, or would the wind change direction and bring them back to land? On that ice Roy Ahmaogak committed his life to God. The wind reversed, and their lives were spared. Roy went on to be a great preacher among his tribe and a translator of the Inupiat New Testament.³

For Roy the Eskimo it was three days on an ice floe, for Elijah a season of retreat in the cave at Horeb,⁴ for Jesus forty days in the desert and six hours on a cross,⁵ for the Apostle Paul three days blind and fasting in Damascus,⁶ and for Jonah three days and nights in the belly of a whale, doing business with God in the depths and at the borders of the valley of the shadow of death. Chapter 2, verse 1:

"Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and thou didst hear my voice.'"

In my younger days of pastoral naivete I considered it my job to apply divine novocaine to such predicaments. I was Reverend *Fix-It*. Now I pause and ask, "What sort of prayer is this situation creating?" Discernment is called for. Is this the devil's

³ Ruth Tucker, *Sacred Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1989), 191.

⁴ 1 Kings 19.

⁵ Luke 4:1-11, 23:13ff.

⁶ Acts 9:1-31.

doing? If so, the proper response is to take authority and pray a prayer of command. Is it the result of human sin or frailty? Then prayers of compassion and forgiveness, encouragement and discipline are appropriate medicines. Or is this, perhaps, *a Jonah moment*, the confinement of God, God pressing hard on the clay that spins on the potter's wheel?⁷ If so, then prayers for illumination and endurance are best. We do not intrude but reverently watch what God is doing. We remain present and pray. Jonah was sealed off by and with God for a season; God isolated Jonah on purpose.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Rescue And Retreat: Jonah Swallowed (1:17)

When we last left Jonah, he had saved the mariners by sacrificing himself. Sure enough- as Jonah forecast, when they tossed him overboard, the hand shaking the tea cup stopped and the seas were calmed. God's pursuit of his run-away preacher was satisfied. Jonah apparently gets his last wish, which is to die rather than have to obey God and head to Nineveh. While he bobs and sinks, the seamen tremble with fear before the Lord, make sacrifices and vow vows. There's revival on deck and judgment in the waters. There is grace for the sailors as they see that the God of the Jews is not just one among many but the one, true Creator of all that is, but is there grace for Jonah? His prayer presumes he spent some time in the soup: verse 3, "... the flood was round about me; all thy waves and billows passed over me.... The water closed in over me, the deep was round about me.... reeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains." Jonah looks death eye to eye. He's drowning in the waters and in the consequences of his betrayal, pulled to the depths by the weight of his sins. Sinking, vanishing, presumed dead: Jonah is missing in action.

Ironically, it is here that Jonah's intention to flee *from the presence of the Lord* is fulfilled. Jonah is alone and about to die without God's comfort, as he notes in his prayer, "Then I said, 'I am cast out from thy presence....'" The intent of Jonah's flight is fulfilled in a way he did not foresee. To flee from the presence of the Lord is to find ourselves feeling terribly alone; we have run away from Reality.

The thought of dying without God is not pleasant, is it? Bad enough to die, but

⁷ I recently watched Ronnie Smith take a wet lump of clay and raise a vase on his potter's wheel. I was struck by how quickly it was formed by the skillful application of pressure. It reminded me of a powerful image for God's skillful work (see Jer. 18:1-12).

even that might be bearable with tangible reminders of God's presence. God is there with Jonah, but God sometimes withholds tangible comforts; Jonah experiences what John of the Cross labeled *The Dark Night Of The Soul*. Only Jesus has experienced the full force of God's felt absence. His cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" marks the outer limits.⁸ Jonah feels forsaken, but underneath are the everlasting arms into which Jonah falls. Jonah's disobedience and betrayal is judged, but it's not the end of the story. The answer to our earlier question is Yes. There is grace for Jonah. Chapter 1, verse 17, "And Yahweh appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." A time limit is set. Jonah does not know how long his stay is, but we do.

There were numerous such stories in the lore of the ancient world, so it's not a new idea.⁹ Scholars line up in two camps depending on whether this is taken as an historical account or as one of the necessary props for a good story, what I call *an historical parable*.¹⁰ Jesus also told such stories; think of *The Prodigal Son*. Is it true to life? Yes, this kind of thing happened with inheritance laws. But was it a single incident Jesus knew about first hand so as to get the facts right? I don't think so, but that does not make it any less a vehicle of God's true Word. The Bible uses all sort of literary forms: proverbs and psalms, history and parable and sermons, blessings and biography, letter and legends, and to know which type you're reading is important.¹¹ A news story is not an editorial. You don't read a love letter with the

⁸ Mark 13:34.

⁹ Samuel Terrien, *The Message of Jonah* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1977), 95; Rosemary Dixon, *The Message of Jonah* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003), 128. For a recent fascinating parallel, see Kate Tracy, "A Modern-Day Jonah: Man Survives Three Days Under the Ocean," www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/december/modern-day-jonah-man-survives-three-days-under-ocean.

¹⁰ By my read the historical elements are: 1) Jonah was an 8th century prophet, 2) the prejudices of Israel were factual, 3) Jonah won a place in the Old Testament through an historical process, 4) Jesus used Jonah's sojourn and the repentance of Nineveh years later as precedents for his preaching and eventual resurrection after three days (Mt. 12:40-41). Parabolic components are the way the story is told as a comedy and satire to stir Israel's conscience as *a light to the nations*. Jonah is a play in which a prophet mocks a prophet. Journalistic history is not the only vehicle through which God speaks.

¹¹ See Don Thorsen and Keith Reeves, *What Christians Believe about the Bible: A Concise Guide for Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), Chapter 3, "Genre," 41-58.

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same eyes as a newsletter, and so the question is, What kind of ancient Jewish literature is Jonah? Some say straightforward history because of their modern prejudice against anything that's not strictly factual.¹²

I have no doubt Jonah was a real historical figure, an eighth century prophet. I also think the Book of Jonah is a carefully composed parable and satire about the betrayal of God's people keeping the truth of God to themselves. It's true to life and a true word from God even if cast in another literary form than straightforward journalism. If you know the one, true God- as the Jews and later as we Christians claim, you have an obligation to get the word out, to be *a light to the nations*,¹³ even to your enemies because you never know who God might have prepared to receive it as the best news ever. Look what happened to the Phoenician mariners and later to Nineveh! Jonah is full of deliberate exaggerations and humor, and when read in public, everyone knew the author was mocking prophets who only accepted safe assignments and mocking fellow Jews who thought God hated the same people they did. This is why it was preserved and made the final cut for the Old Testament.

Whatever the decision, Jonah is a story from God for his people. Why does Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* continue to speak with such power? Why does *The Sound of Music* move each new generation? Or Henry Fonda in *It's Wonderful Life* each Christmas? Why are these become classics? Because they echo something that is deep and true; they tell us the truth through historical fiction. How much more the message of a play written by one inspired Hebrew prophet about another? That Jesus used the imagery of Jonah to speak about his coming death and resurrection is not a statement about the literary form of the book but about Jonah's symbolic death and resurrection as a parable of Jesus' own vindication in bodily resurrection.¹⁴ The whole city of Nineveh listened to Jonah and turned to God, but did Jerusalem do so for Jesus? No, only a few, and how much greater is Jesus than Jonah, so how much greater is Jerusalem's judgment which came forty years later when surrounded by Roman siege works? In our story Jonah had a near-death experience and was rescued; he nearly died. But Jesus did truly die; he entered the depths of death and from there was bodily raised on the third day, and that is not an historical fiction or satire but an act of God that left behind an empty tomb and led to multiple

¹² Nixon, *Jonah*, 129ff.

¹³ Isaiah 42:6.

¹⁴ Matthew 12:40-41.

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appearances to friends and foes alike.¹⁵ Jonah was sent to a single sinful city; the message of Jesus is for the whole world because as Jonah prayed and Jesus knew even more intimately, *Deliverance belong to the Lord!* Jonah did not know the downward and upward movements of his life would later be taken up by Jesus to describe his own journey of obedience to God. Jonah was not just about Nineveh; his story would later become a parable for what happened to Jesus years later. We simply do not know the final meaning of our own actions, but nothing is lost to God.

Whatever you make of these questions, and we don't have to agree to get the message right; the fish is part of a larger pattern which demonstrates the Lord's power over nature. The Lord God is not the distant deity of deism, a clockmaker who wound the world up in the Big Bang and now lets it unwind without interference as he watches from the stands.¹⁶ Ours is *an involved God*, One who hurls winds across the sea, appoints a fish to swallow and regurgitate Jonah, makes a plant to grow up overnight to give the prophet shade, then sends a worm to destroy the plant. One teacher writes: "...the Creator God is breaking into His ordered creation and literally moving heaven and earth to save his people.... Yahweh works with all levels... to deal with His servant Jonah, and through Jonah with all his chosen people."¹⁷

God bends creation to see people saved. I have room in my worldview for miracles and wonders for two reasons. The Bible is full of them, and I've been present for several. The signs of the risen Jesus are still with us through his Spirit, though not under our control. The Book of Jonah teaches rightly that God has an easier time with whales and worms than with His preachers and people who are hesitant about reaching outside their comfort zone. But don't miss the humor as well. A safe, underwater taxi back to the shores of Palestine is provided. Jonah leaves Joppa on top of the waves; he comes back underneath them. With a great Gulp! Jonah vanishes into the darkness where for three days and nights he lives with God,

¹⁵ For a treatment of the relevant texts, see Phil Thrailkill, *Resurrection: A Pastor's Reading of the Major New Testament Resurrection Passages* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol, 2013); for an historical defense, see Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004).

¹⁶ That Enlightenment deism which conveniently leaves the running of the world to us down below is not a new thing but only a new form of ancient Epicureanism is discussed in N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2013).

¹⁷ John Kohlenbrger, *Jonah and Nahum* (Chicago, ILL: Moody Press, 1984), 43.

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his own thoughts, and his appointed host. "I thought I was going to die. I wanted to die. What is God up to? Is Nineveh that important to Yahweh to rescue me? How is my story going to end? Might it not be a good time to compose a song?"

These are good questions for anyone who's experienced a divine rescue. You glance in your rear view mirror and see the train whoosh by. The man with the wrecker says, "I've never seen anyone escape a crash like this one." You do enough drugs to fry your brain and can still think. The doctor flips up the X-Ray and shakes her head, "We can't explain it, but the cancer's gone." The surgeon says, "We got it all!" And underneath are the everlasting arms. Ahead is some new place of service if we will follow instead of lapsing back into the old ruts and routine ways. To read your situation as *survivor's guilt*, as some understandably do, is to miss the point. There's a call on your life, so listen and pray and obey. Why are you alive?

Jonah's Prayer From The Depths (2:1-9)

Don't ever make fun of foxhole religion. Some of God's best work is done in tight spots: foxholes for soldiers, fish bellies for wayward prophets, pig sties for prodigals and playboys. It was here Jonah experienced a turn of sorts, from running "away from the presence of the Lord" to speaking to the Lord in prayer. Chapter 2, verse 1: "Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying...."

It is perhaps not so remarkable that Jonah prays in a crisis. What's worthy of note is the prayer he offers. It's a beautifully constructed prayer. Any Hebrew who knew the Psalms and the temple liturgy would recognize it as a *Psalms of Praise*. All six standard parts are there. Almost every phrase is from the Psalms; I count fifteen references. In the middle of the worst crisis of his life, Jonah sings (Yes, sings, because that's what a Psalm is, the lyrics of a song) a formal prayer.¹⁸ He learned to pray in the temple with borrowed words and standard forms.

The ship that was about to be a tomb became a temple for the sailors and the belly of the fish a place of prayer for Jonah. Now to be technical for a moment, we actually have two prayers here. The first is reported in verse 2, "I called to the LORD out of *my distress*, and he answered me; out of *the belly of Sheol* I cried (screamed) and thou didst hear my voice." I doubt this was a formal prayer of balanced phrases. It was an anguished scream, the kind they find on black box recordings of downed airliners. Expletives in such situations are counted as prayers! The Lord is not a

¹⁸ On the psalms in the church, see N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms*.

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prude or a censor. The formal thanksgiving, however, looks back on the whole event after the deliverance is done.¹⁹ As he was drowning Jonah screamed out to God, and God answered with an enforced retreat in a subterranean taxi. The formal psalm was composed looking back on the whole incident from the dry land.

The national anthem of the Methodists is Charles Wesley's *O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing*; it's the first hymn in our hymnal for that reason.²⁰ But it was not written in the midst of his conversion on a sick bed of pleurisy but a year later on its anniversary. But if you were writing a musical about Charles' and John's conversions, you might have Charles sing the hymn in his sick room just after the assurance of the Holy Spirit came into his heart. And that is precisely what the unnamed author of *Jonah* has done. Time is compressed for the sake of the drama. In his poem *Jonah*, Alduous Huxley captures the scene:

"Seated on the convex mound of one vast kidney, Jonah prays and sings his... hymns, making the hollow vault resound God's goodness and mysterious ways, till the great fish spouts music as he swims."²¹

When someone asks, "Pastor Phil, how can I learn to pray?" I have a standard answer, and it's not what they expect.

"Come to worship on Sundays. Enter the silence. Pray the hymns and songs. Offer with us the opening prayer written to reflect the theme of the day. Pray throughout the Scripture readings and sermon for the illumining darts of the Holy Spirit. Sing the responses of the Great Thanksgiving on communion Sundays; enter into the familiar rhythms of the Lord's Prayer; receive the anointing with oil and prayer for

¹⁹ Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 105.

²⁰ For the story, see John R. Tyson, *Assist Me To Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), Chapter 3, "Pentecost Becomes Personal," 40-58; S.T. Kimbrough, *A Heart To Praise My God* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 15-29; John Lawson, *A Thousand Tongues: The Wesley Hymns, A Guide To Their Scriptural Teaching* (London: Paternoster, 1987), 126-128. On the many Scripture citations in this hymn, see Appendix 1, p.15. What Jonah did, Charles Wesley did, which is cast Scripture into a new song. This must be done in each generation.

²¹ Terrien, *The Message*, 96.

healing; let the Benediction flow over you with grace and assurance. Learn to pray by immersing yourselves in the standard prayer rhythms of God's people. Every Sunday is a school of prayer, a smorgasbord of communication with the Living God. Then, after you have learned community prayer, I will coach you in private prayer. And for a weekly booster in the great school of prayer, come to the Thursday evening prayer meeting in the chapel.”

I sometimes then give them a card on which the Lord’s Prayer is printed and ask them to learn to pray it slowly several times a day, then check back with me.

The prayer of the community has a logical priority over the prayer of the individual. We are not a religion of the self-made man or woman. We are the living extension of a community that’s been praying together once a week, whether Sabbath or Sunday, for eons before any of us came along. To pray is to join a prayer meeting that never ends and has been going on a very long time.

When about to die, Jonah's thoughts were on the Jerusalem Temple, where he had often gathered for song and sacrifice. Chapter 2, verse 4, "I am cast out from thy presence; How shall I look upon *thy holy temple*?" (Translated: "If I die here, I'll never again go to church and sing 'Amazing Grace.'") When God rescued Jonah by the fish, again he thought of the temple: verse 7, "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to thee, to *thy holy temple*."

In the belly of the fish Jonah rehearsed the tunes and lyrics he learned in church. How many hymns and songs do you know by heart, that you can call to mind when in the belly of some dark place? I am grateful for the hundreds of hours Gail Hinnant and I spent singing through *The United Methodist Hymnal* during my first appointment in Fairfield County. She was my church pianist, and every Saturday evening with few exceptions we sang the first two stanzas of thirty or more hymns to teach me to sing, and then Lori and I ate her mother’s world class hamburgers. For years there was a greasy spot on their living room wall where I rested by left hand during the singing. It helped me pray and sometimes offer a song at a bedside with some saint or sinner in distress. It furnished my imagination.

That goes against our grain, doesn't it? Our modern psychological orientation prefers the *spontaneous* to the disciplined, the *occasional* to the thoughtful, the *individual* to the gathered. I still get complaints from saints who wish I wouldn't write out the opening prayer. "Why don't you pray from the heart?" they ask. I want

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to answer, "Because my heart is empty and at the bottom a dark pit. If I were to pray my heart without proper censorship, I might spew out a string of ideas that would shock us all and ruin my career. Not all my thoughts are pretty prayers."²² One person suggested I write it ahead of time but not publish it so that people would think I was praying extempore. That felt dishonest. When I explain that public prayer is not the same as airing one's private devotions and that most of the Bible's prayers follow set forms, they're still not convinced. They expect a rush of eloquence from a pure heart, and occasionally that happens to my surprise. At times prayer may be like falling in love. It just sort of hits you at the glandular level. But prayer is also a craft, a skill like bricklaying or cross stitch or painting or plumbing. Eugene Peterson is right:

"This is amazing. Prayer, which we often suppose is truest when most spontaneous the raw expression of our human condition without contrivance or artifice- shows up in Jonah when he is in the rawest condition imaginable as 'learned.' Our surprise lessens when we consider language itself: we begin with inarticulate cries and coos, but after years of learning we become capable of crafting sonnets. Are infant sounds more honest than Shakespeare's sonnets? They are both honest, but the sonnets have far more experience in them. Honesty is essential in prayer, but we are after more. We are after as much of life as possible- all of life if possible- brought to expression in answering God. That means learning a form of prayer adequate to the complexity of our lives."²³

This is not an argument for the elimination of charismatic or free prayer as the Spirit moves. Not at all. We will never outgrow the need, or the opportunity. The Spirit intercedes for us, says Paul, with sighs and groans too deep for words.²⁴ But alongside the volunteers and wild flowers, there is need for a carefully cultivated garden of prayers and prayer forms that do not depend on the feelings of the moment and are not devotional in the chatty sense.²⁵

²² Read Mark 7:20-23 for Jesus' catalog of vices that inhabited the hearts of those to whom he spoke. Think of it as a moral inventory of the heart, and all of it ugly.

²³ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 101.

²⁴ Romans 8:26b.

²⁵ See "Ways of Praying," *The U.M. Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: The U.M. Publishing House, 1992), 445-447.

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Whenever prayer runs dry and words fail, I take out one of the books of prayers off the shelf and read a few. I allow Augustine or Cranmer²⁶ or Wesley or Luther or Billy Graham to lead me in prayer as I mouth the words after them. It never fails. My own heart comes alive as I use the beautiful words of others to speak to God. To have to compose all your own music is an impossible burden. To sing the songs of others is a delight. So from their fire I borrow a spark, and with their tune my own song to God comes alive.²⁷

Prayer has power, not in itself as the newest form of feel-good therapy, but because it sets everything in a new context; it opens our small, cramped worlds to God's wide expanse. Prayer has power through the Holy Spirit to cut through despair and to open us to new light. In prayer I laugh and I cry and I listen and I hope.

Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel tells of a strange trial he observed during his imprisonment at Auschwitz. One winter evening, three rabbis: "all erudite and pious men," indicted God for allowing his children to be massacred in the camps. After the trial in which God had been found guilty as charged, one of the rabbis looked at the watch he had somehow managed to reserve in the kingdom of night and said, "Ah, it is time for prayers." And with that the three rabbis bowed their heads and prayed.²⁸ Like Jonah in the belly of the fish, their darkness was given light by the *habit of prayer* according to the forms of the synagogue and language of the Psalms.

Hurled Towards Obedience (2:9-10)

The Psalm of Jonah ends with words of praise and commitment: chapter 2, verse 9, "But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee; what I have vowed I will pay. *Deliverance belongs to the Lord.*" New life and hope came to Jonah as he prayed; pain and prayer moved Jonah to a new place. He and God are talking again, so something is about to happen. His prayer is swiftly answered by two actions, one invisible, one visible. Verse 10, "And the Lord spoke to the fish (isn't it wild to think that God can speak *blue whale* or *tuna* or *great white shark?*), and it vomited Jonah

²⁶ C. Frederick Barbee, Paul F.M. Zahl, *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1999).

²⁷ For a recent collection, see Ken Gire, *Between Earth and Heaven* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997).

²⁸ "To Illustrate," *Preaching*, March-April, 1993, 55.

out upon the dry land." The indigestible prophet is shot forth. His overly-pious psalm apparently made the whale nauseous because in it there's no real confession of sin or repentance, just thanks for rescue and a side-wise dig at the pagan mariners.²⁹ Jonah is grateful, but still sees himself as a bit superior to the new converts rejoicing on deck. But his is not a dignified departure. Jonah did not saunter forth across the tongue as if disembarking by gangway from a cruise ship. The Hebrew word is projectile. He was, to use current slang, *hurled* onto the shore, no doubt on the compass heading for Nineveh, as if the whale said, "You make me sick, but God is not yet through with you, Jonah!" The prayers learned in church and invoked in the belly of some deep predicament must necessarily set us back on the rails of obedience. The test is not that we get what we want but that God gets what God wants. We pray every week, often without thinking, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Do you know what you pray? O God, treat me like Jonah! Track me down, scare me, sink me, swallow me, isolate me, but please, spit me out in the right direction. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*

CONCLUSION

A woman once purchased a piece of needlework at a craft fair; it read *Prayer Changes Things*. She hung it over the fireplace. Several days later it was missing, and she- by questioning her husband- discovered the culprit. She asked if it disturbed him because he didn't believe in the power of prayer.

"No, it's not that," he replied. "I believe in prayer. I even believe it changes things. I just don't happen to like change, and so I took it down."³⁰

Apparently Jonah is still among us. Are you Jonah?

We Jews and Christians are the people who are learning to pray and to obey in order to share God's story with a lost world wherever God send us. How's it going with God stretching your heart in the direction of mercy? And if you are in a narrow place and sinking, it's time to pray and see what surprises God might have in mind.

²⁹ John Holbert, *Deliverance Belong to YHWH: Satire in the Book of Jonah*, JSOT 21 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981), 353; Youngblood, *Jonah*: 111.

³⁰ "Windows in Preaching," *Circuit Rider*, Dec/Jan, 1991, 27.

CHARLES WESLEY

O FOR A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING³¹

(*U.M. Hymnal*: 57, Originally 18 verses, 7 in our hymnal now)

Wesley did what Jonah did, take multiple echoes and cast them in a

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|----|---|--|
| 1. | O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace! | Ps. 35:28, 69:30, 71:23
Song of Sol. 2:16, Col. 1:13
Ps. 21:5, 44:4, 74:12
Rom. 8:37, 2 Cor. 2:14 |
| 2. | My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad
the honors of thy name. | Ps. 86:15, 1 Pt. 2:3
Lk. 12:3, Acts 16:9
Mt. 9:31, James 2:7
2 Pet. 1:17 |
| 3. | Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health, and peace. | Is. 61:1-3, Lk. 4:18-19
John 16:22
Lk. 15:25
Lk. 5:17, Rom. 8:6 |
| 4. | He breaks the power of canceled sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean;
his blood availed for me. | Rom. 6:1-2, 18
Is. 61:1
Zech. 13:1
Gal. 2:20, 1 Tim. 1:13-14 |
| 5. | He speaks, and listening to his voice,
new life the dead receive;
the mournful, broken hearts rejoice,
the humble poor believe. | Mk. 5:41-42, John 11:43-44
<i>John</i> 6:39
Mt. 61:3, Mt. 5:4
Mt. 11:5, James 2:5, Lk. 6:20 |
| 6. | Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,
your loosened tongues employ;
ye blind, behold your savior come,
and leap, ye lame, for joy. | Mt. 11:5, Mk. 7:34
Mk. 7:35
Lk. 18:35, 37, 42-43
Acts 3:6-8 |
| 7. | In Christ, your head, you then shall know,
shall feel your sins forgiven;
anticipate your heaven below,
and own that love is heaven. | 1 Tim. 1:15-16
Acts 13:38
Eph. 2:6, Heb. 6:5
1 Jn. 4:7 |

³¹ Scripture references are taken from John Lawson, *A Thousand Tongues: The Wesley Hymns, A Guide To Their Scriptural Teaching* (London: Paternoster, 1987), 126-128.