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Salvation All Together: A Fishy Story (to Say the Least)

If I were to say, “Once upon a time.” Or, maybe even, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.” Would you settle into your seat and prepare yourself for a fabulous fairy tale, or better yet an epic space saga? Would you be filled with excitement and anticipation knowing a good story was about to unfold? One that would allow you to travel to a far away land, where anything is possible. Knowing at the end of it all you would leave feeling even more exhilarated and filled with hope and purpose than when you first entered the story. Our famously fishy tale for today begins in just this way, as the book of Jonah opens with the Hebrew words that would have put every good little ancient Israelite boy or girl on the edge of their seats as they heard those magical words, Vah-yehi, or “And it came to pass...”.

Many of us know the story of Jonah and the Whale. It’s hard not to remember the story of a man surviving three days in the belly of a giant water dwelling creature. But, if you’re anything like me, much past the questioning of the story being fact or fiction, or the image of a man chilling inside the Costco sized intestinal system of a ginormous sea beast, the rest of the story is fairly foggy, or at the very least seemingly irrelevant. At the same time this biblical narrative was intended to be one of the most memorable and unbelievable stories of its time. Not simply because it is one whale of a tale, but more specifically because it speaks to a difficult and necessary truth about our human condition while presenting hope in the midst of extraordinary despair and division. Making it all the more relevant for us today as well.

As I said earlier, our story begins with “And it came to pass... that God’s Word came to Jonah”. And God said to Jonah “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” Now, if you were Jonah and the all powerful, all knowing, all being God opened the heavens and began speaking to you, how might you respond? My guess is you would either be: dumbstruck, questioning your sanity, anxious to ask a few questions, or simply 100% obedient and compliant, because this is God who is speaking to you. But, let’s just assume Jonah is not as smart as you, because he responds by hightailing it out of there and trying to run away from God as fast as his tiny human legs would allow. But, as you would expect, Jonah doesn’t get very far. Because, as Jonah continues to run away, by jumping in a boat and heading for another country, God sends a great storm. Causing the sailors of the boat to employ all of their maritime skills, praying to their own gods. And finally turning to Jonah, and pleading with him, “Tell us why has this great calamity come upon us?” Who are you? And, what God do you worship who would cause all this? To which Jonah responds, “the Lord God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” Causing the sailors to become all the more fearful, knowing this God is great God! And just as the sea grows more and more tempestuous and the sailors, having exhausted all imaginable options, begin to pray to Jonah’s God, Jonah offers himself up as a sacrifice. Allowing the sailors to hoist Jonah overboard, just as Shamu, the great sea creature, jumps up and out of the water to swallow him whole.

Three days later, we find Jonah chilling the belly of the whale, finally ready to turn to God, as he prays for a miracle, and his freedom. And, no sooner is Jonah regurgitated up and out of the Whales Belly onto the dry land. Of course, once again finding himself being called by God to go to Nineveh. The only difference, being that this time around he follows the call. And while that

may seem to be one of the most miraculous and memorable portions of our story, a man surviving three days in the belly of a whale. I would again argue that it is nothing compared to what comes next.

Now, just to give a little background, at the time of our story, Nineveh was the largest city and the capital of the neo-Assyrian Empire. It was, to put it nicely, a pit of despair. The city was known as a place of debauchery, violence, and utter chaos. So, it is really no surprise that Jonah didn't want to go there. For one, the Assyrians had captured, enslaved, and forcibly moved his nation (Israel) out of their homeland. As such the Israeli people were not big fans of the Assyrians. So, when I say this is the most miraculous part of our story, I mean it. Because, what happens next, in my mind, is nothing short of a miracle. As Jonah enters Nineveh (which we are told is a three days walk), he enters the scene preaching what I can only describe as the worst sermon in the history of homiletics, proclaiming "forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." And, that's it. I imagine it happening a bit like my children apologize to one another "yeah yeah sorry." But, despite Jonah's lackluster proclamation, the entire city turns from their wicked ways and repents. Even the king gets onboard ordering everyone, "Human beings and animals" alike, to "be covered with sackcloth, and... cry mightily to God." Imploring his people he says "All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." Which is exactly what happens. God saves the city from destruction, as an entire people turn from their former despair and division coming together in hope of restoration and salvation.

Now, you may think that is the end, happily ever after, right?! But, no. Jonah, having successfully saved Nineveh from God's wrath, spurring an entire people and their livestock to turn and repent, now (for some reason) storms off in huff. Pouting and enraged because, well, he really wanted to witness the destruction of his oppressor and enemy. As he cries out in the midst of his tantrum, "this is why I didn't want to go to Nineveh, God. Because 'I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.'" As God seeks out Jonah, like a parent to a toddler, entering the eye of a storm. God kneels down next to Jonah, puts the Divine hand on his shoulder and asks, "is it right for you to be so angry?"

The story of Jonah is a story of both comedy and tragedy. Comedy because it is utterly unbelievable in all the outlandish ways the story unfolds. And, tragedy in the fact that at the end of it all, as an entire people ravaged by violence and self centeredness come together for the good of the many all thanks to our prophet, Jonah is still too wrapped up in his anger and hatred against the Assyrians and the people of Nineveh to enjoy the fruits of his labor. To join in the celebration and praise of his own good and loving God. Now to be fair, Jonah was rightly outraged, and this is not to excuse abuse or violence in any way; nor does our story as the Ninevites were required to repent and turn in order to receive their salvation. At the same time our story of Jonah is memorable because it brings hope into the midst of fear and division and speaks truth to the frailty of our human condition. Reminding us that we are never too far gone, too separated, or too lost to achieve salvation. But, as long as we continue to hold onto anger, to hate our enemies, and to reject the other, we will continue to disallow ourselves from joining in the celebration, in the communal song of praise that is our salvation. For, As the French poet Charles Puegy wrote, "we must be saved together, we cannot go to God alone else he would ask, 'where are the others.'"