

## 1 Sermon, November 25, 2012

Texts: Jonah 2:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Title: "Thanksgiving"

1. Jonah – thankful in the belly of the fish
2. But Jonah was not thankful when his enemies found favor with God.
3. What are you thankful for? Why?
4. Thanks for what is eternal

### 1. Jonah – thankful in the belly of the fish

The book of Jonah is not just a story for children.

It's a parable about a man who runs away from God, because God wants him to do something he does *not* want to do. God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh (that great city) and preach to the people to turn away from their sinful ways. If they repent, God will spare the city.

But Jonah does not like the Ninevites. He hates them. He would rather that God would smite the people of Nineveh and destroy their city. So Jonah does not want to go to where God wants him to go.

The big fish, or whale (or whatever) that swallows up Jonah is not the high point of the story. No, the fish is just God's means of getting Jonah to go in the right direction, toward Nineveh.

The story is really about Jonah going to Nineveh.

So it is that this parable has Jonah running off in the opposite direction from Nineveh, paying fare on a sailing ship, and then the sailors throwing him off the boat because, basically, Jonah is bad luck.

That's when the fish swallows Jonah, and that's when, according to the story, Jonah prays the following prayer from the fish's belly:

I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

3 You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.

4 Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?'

5 The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head

6 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.

## 2 Sermon, November 25, 2012

7 As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

8 Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.

9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

You can tell that there are certain unlikely aspects to the story, such as the fish itself, and Jonah's eloquence inside the fish, even if it was a prayer he had learned by heart.

The point is that Jonah was able to be thankful to God in the belly of the fish, and that's why God answered his prayers, and cause the fish to spit him out.

Jonah was thankful in the unlikeliest of places.

### 2. But Jonah was not thankful when his enemies found favor with God.

The story goes on that Jonah does go on to Nineveh, he does preach there, the Ninevites do repent, God saves the city, and Jonah is very angry.

Jonah did not like the idea that his enemies found favor with God. But God tells Jonah that the Ninevites are his children, too.

### 3. What are you thankful for? Why?

What are you thankful for?

Not for God's presence in the belly of a fish.

You may pray for your enemies, but you're probably not thankful on behalf of your enemies.

When you sat around the Thanksgiving table, what did you talk about being thankful for?

Family? Friends? Home? Sufficient food? A free nation?

Those are all things many of us put at the top of our list of things to be thankful for.

### 4. Thanks for what is eternal

But from what I can tell, in the psalms and the gospels and letters, the people the Bible talks about gave thanks for things not on that usual list.

### 3 Sermon, November 25, 2012

They gave thanks for God's goodness, for God's saving power, for God's rescuing hand.

They gave thanks for eternal life, and that their names were written in heaven. They gave thanks for the presence of the risen Christ.

It makes me wonder, on this Thanksgiving weekend, what do I give thanks for? Is it only for the things I can see and touch, or do I give thanks for the goodness of God, or for giving me a heart that is capable of worship, or for what the Spirit is able to do?

I wonder:

Would I be thankful if I lost my home?

Would I be thankful if I lost my friends?

Would I be thankful if I lost my family?

Would we be thankful if I suddenly lost the use of my legs or eyes?

What if our nation were invaded by another? Would I still be thankful?

If I lost my ability to think clearly, or if I found myself with a terrible choice to make, would I still be thankful?

Would I be able, like Job, to still praise God?

Let me read to you again the passage from 2 Corinthians, where Paul doesn't give thanks for what can be seen or touched, but for the eternal to come. Listen for what Paul is thankful for.

"But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture--"I believed, and so I spoke" --we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." 2 Corinthians 4:13-18, NRSV.

#### 4 Sermon, November 25, 2012

So the upshot of all this wondering is to make me think that I ought to re-look at what I'm thankful for.

I think I should start out with life itself, and the ability to think and to love God. To that I should add a desire to love God, and an appreciation of how great and good God is. I want to be thankful that God loves me, even though I am one of billions of humans and trillions of creatures on the planet.

And then I should start to thank God for family and friends and faith and freedom.

Like Jonah and Paul and others in the Bible, I want to start giving thanks for who God is.

The New England puritans, whom we often call "Pilgrims," thanked God for sustaining them. They had been at the point of starvation, but they made it. They survived, and so they were thankful for life itself, and for the ability to praise God.

I think we modern Americans, who not only survive but thrive, who live in a land of plenty, don't appreciate the gift of life itself nearly as much as those Puritans did.

That's a message we can all benefit from, and perhaps spread the news about. Be thankful. For life itself, and for God's goodness.

"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 you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!' Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." Jonah 2:1-10, NRSV.