

## “In the Belly of the Big Fish”

### Jonah 1: 1-17

The LORD’s word came to Jonah, Amittai’s son: <sup>2</sup> “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention.”

<sup>3</sup> So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the LORD! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD. <sup>4</sup> But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, so that there was a great storm on the sea; the ship looked like it might be broken to pieces. <sup>5</sup> The sailors were terrified, and each one cried out to his god. They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to make it lighter.

Now Jonah had gone down into the hold of the vessel to lie down and was deep in sleep. <sup>6</sup> The ship’s officer came and said to him, “How can you possibly be sleeping so deeply? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps the god will give some thought to us so that we won’t perish.”

<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the sailors said to each other, “Come on, let’s cast lots so that we might learn who is to blame for this evil that’s happening to us.” They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> So they said to him, “Tell us, since you’re the cause of this evil happening to us: What do you do and where are you from? What’s your country and of what people are you?”

<sup>9</sup> He said to them, “I’m a Hebrew. I worship the LORD, the God of heaven—who made the sea and the dry land.”

<sup>10</sup> Then the men were terrified and said to him, “What have you done?” (The men knew that Jonah was fleeing from the LORD, because he had told them.)

<sup>11</sup> They said to him, “What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us?” (The sea was continuing to rage.)

<sup>12</sup> He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea! Then the sea will become calm around you. I know it’s my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

<sup>13</sup> The men rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn’t manage it because the sea continued to rage against them. <sup>14</sup> So they called on the LORD, saying, “Please, LORD,

don't let us perish on account of this man's life, and don't blame us for innocent blood! You are the LORD: whatever you want, you can do." <sup>15</sup> Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. <sup>16</sup> The men worshipped the LORD with a profound reverence; they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made solemn promises.

<sup>17</sup> <sup>a</sup> Meanwhile, the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Yesterday was a weird day as in it is weird that it represented what is becoming my new norm. It felt like each moment brought a change in plans. From hearing that worship would be different today because of Covid exposure to reading a letter from our denomination letting pastors know that they were concerned about threats made against Disciples of Christ congregations, like ours for Sunday, January 17<sup>th</sup>.

At one time this would not have worried me because I would have assumed that we were a small congregation in a small community surrounded by people who know we are as a community of faith. But since we have moved online, we have become a virtual church, reaching people across our state, across our nation, yes, even reaching people internationally. All of a sudden the weirdness of yesterday made the unknown very real for me, even to the point, I was afraid to walk to church especially after I saw a gentlemen who was on his phone had

stopped at the corner of our church building. My first reaction was... Well I'm not allowed to say those words on camera.

When I went to check the situation out, it was simply one of our church members who was out for a walk. He had stopped to text a friend and was finding a resting place on our church grounds.

As I continue to reflect on the events of yesterday and this morning, I know that fear and worry are mixed into my reaction but I cannot help but think there is something more going on as well. The very irony of comparing Jonah's story and what is happening in our world right now is not missed by me. We like to think of Jonah as a prophet, because that allows us to separate Jonah from ourselves. But in reality, Jonah is never called a prophet. In this story, he is simply a guy named and claimed by God. A guy who does not want to do what God has asked him to do because maybe it pushes him out of his comfort zone. Or maybe because he doesn't want to get involved in other people's business. Or maybe because Jonah thinks if he ignores it long enough it will simply go away. In our story, Jonah is simply a guy who is experiencing how his reluctance to trust and obey affects him and others around him.

Again this week, I don't pretend to have all the answers and I am certainly not going to say that I have followed and obeyed every time God has called me to do something, even if it was a task I didn't want to do.

But after thinking about the events of this past week, and yes worrying about what this week will hold, it continues to become very clear to me that we cannot take our calling to be people of healing and wholeness lightly anymore. Or maybe the better way of saying this is that we should have never taken our calling to be people of healing and wholeness lightly. And now I cannot help but wonder if these times of uncertainty are our time in the belly of the big fish, thinking about and coming to terms with the consequences of our actions, and yes our inactions as well.

Last week, we talked about the fact that we are named and claimed as God's Beloved and how this is a gift which can never be taken away from us. This week, as we sit with Jonah in the belly of the big fish, we are learning that this claim of being God's Beloved means something for our lives. It means something for our words. It means something for our actions. It means something when we fail to speak up, when we fail to act in ways which bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's people.

So maybe this week, instead of offering answers, I am simply inviting all of us to sit in the belly of the big fish for a while, to think, to reflect, to meditate on what it means to be disciples of Christ, on what it means to be followers of Jesus. Maybe this week, instead of going about our business as usual, whatever that means lately, maybe this week, we take the time to think about how our words, how our actions, how our inaction have affected us and those around us as well.

Because healing cannot begin until we name some of the harsh truths we have been avoiding, harsh truths such as that we know that our system is not broken but rather we know and accepted it is designed to keep people oppressed, to keep people divided. Harsh Truths such as we know that the work of justice is hard but if we don't see the benefit for ourselves, it is work that we are not interested in doing. Harsh Truths that whether we want to admit it or not, we wear our privilege well and in the changing of the season, it will always be our first choice.

Again, I am not pretending to have all the answers but it is my hope, it is my prayer that this time in the belly of the big fish brings about a change of heart for all of us, myself included as we confess that we have not lived up to our calling, that we have not acted in ways which bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's people. May this time in the belly of the big fish be a time of growth, a time

of spiritual renewal as we name how our reluctance to be the people God calls us  
to be affects us as well as the others around us. Amen.