

Falling Upwards (Jonah 2 & 3)

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Well, after a chapter on the run from God, seeking unsuccessfully to weather a wild storm, and three days gestating in the dank confines of a large marine creature, (a truly ‘dark night of the soul’) our pouting prophet seems suddenly to find voice. ‘On the third day’, or so the story may be read, the silence is pierced by prayer (cf. Millar 2009.152). Chapter two, verse 1, ‘*Then Jonah prayed to YHWH his god from the insides of the lady-fish*’.¹

According to 20th century German theologian, Karl Barth, two conditions are necessary in theological work – anguish and prayer. ‘Theological work can be undertaken and accomplished only amid great distress,’ he writes. ‘[It] does not merely begin with prayer and is not merely accompanied by it; in its totality it is peculiar and characteristic of theology that it can be performed only in the act of prayer’ (1963.148). If this is so, then what we’re seeing here is a shift in Jonah – from theological evasion to theological engagement.

I mentioned last week that being swallowed by a lady-fish (though constricting) seemed somehow pregnant with possibility, and so it happens in this watery ‘womb’, that words begin to form. Words of complaint, initially, expressing grievance. Before Jonah can find any semblance of peace, it seems, he must protest. And in this regard, he’s in good company; the Book of Psalms brims with this kind of prayer. Indeed, almost every phrase in Jonah’s prayer comes directly from the Psalms. Jonah will gain insight, but only as he gives utterance to affliction, and to do that, he borrows from the tradition.

Out of the belly of Sheol I cried ... You threw me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me, he bemoans. *I am driven away from your sight.* In other words: *God, I’m*

¹ I am using Jeanette Mathews’ (2022) translation of Jonah.

drowning here, and it's your fault!! There's nothing subtle or polite in these opening lines, they are full of accusation – you threw, your waves, your billows, your sight. Jonah has called himself a worshipper of YHWH; is this what it means to worship in situations of distress? Isn't it disrespectful or lacking in faith? It's not how most of us were taught to pray. And yet, here it is, enshrined in scripture. And, later, practiced by Jesus. Remember his anguished words from the cross (again drawn from a psalm²) – *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

And it makes me wonder, when lament is neglected or curtailed, does that somehow keep us trapped in grief and bitterness, cut off from God, and life? Jonah's complaining, 'is serious spiritual work', Matthew Anstey writes: 'demanding, argumentative, unmasking work' (2009.40).

And, as we return to the text, I note that word 'unmasking'. For here, in the very midst of his tirade, there appears a surprising flicker of light: *'Yet will I again look upon your holy temple'*.³ In our English translation, it's phrased as a question: 'How shall I look again upon your holy temple?' In the Hebrew, it's a statement, a declaration. So, where did that come from; it's such a contrast to the opening salvo? It's all mayhem and misery, and then, out of the blue, this mention of temple? Momentarily, it seems, he has a change of perspective. In that time, the temple represented the earthly focus of God's glory. Symbolically, to look upon the temple was to face God, to orient oneself in God's way (like facing Mecca). *'Yet will I again look upon your holy temple'*. Could this be the first intimation of an advent for Jonah?

If these troubled waters did calm and part, it wasn't for long. In the very next verse, he's whelmed over again, back to lamenting, though, interestingly, less accusingly now. Instead of blaming God, it's more of a recounting of his plight: *'The waters closed in over me, the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my*

² Psalm 22

³ In the text of this reflection, I again draw heavily on Jeanette Mathew's (2020) translation of the Hebrew text of Jonah. See also Robert Alter (2015).

head. To the roots of the mountains, I went down; the underworld with its bars is around me forever.'

Last week, we saw how the text emphasised the downward direction of Jonah's journey – he heads down to Joppa, down into the hold of ship, and down into a deep sleep. In chapter 2, his descent continues. Down, down, and down he sinks, under the mountains and into the desolate underworld. To Jonah, it feels like the end ... And then it happens again ... a flicker of light. More than a flicker this time, more like the breaking of dawn. *'As my breath was weakening over me/ YHWH, I remembered. And my prayer came to you/ to your holy temple.'*

Gradually, it seems, this process of giving voice to complaint is transforming his perspective, uncovering a deeper sense of reality. We see this same pattern and progression in many of the psalms of lament – they begin with accusation and end in affirmation. *'The ones paying regard to idols of worthlessness// Their kindness they will forsake'*, he continues, sounding surprisingly clear and confident. *But I myself with a voice of praise / I wish to sacrifice to you. That which I vow I wish to fulfil / Deliverance to YHWH!*' This sounds like a radical change of mind, like repentance - metanoia! And in the story, release is immediate and dramatic. *'And YHWH spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out onto dry land.'*

And with this, the story starts over again. Chapter three, verse one: And the word of YHWH happened to Jonah a second time, saying: *'Get up, journey to Nineveh the great city and call out to her the warning call which I am speaking to you. And Jonah got up and journeyed to Nineveh according to the word of YHWH.'* The commission hasn't changed but the early signs suggest that Jonah's struggle has changed him. This time, he gets up and heads in the right direction.

And Nineveh was a great city to God, it says, a journey of three days. And Jonah began to go into the city, a journey of one day, and he called out and said, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh is overturned.'

In stark contrast to the time it takes him to get to this great city, the prophet's communiqué is 'famously brief' (Mathews 213). Just 5 words in Hebrew –

'Yet forty days and Nineveh overturned'. There's no mention of God, no inventory of faults, no call to repentance, just this blunt pronouncement. And, I wonder, does this suggest a hint at reluctance on Jonah's part, was his heart *really* in it? We'll reflect on this later, but for now, let's focus on the impact of his preaching and what it suggests about the underlying message of the story.

As the chapter unfolds, it's clear that Nineveh is indeed *overturned* – 'not in destruction but in extravagant repentance' (Mathews 213). *'And the people of Nineveh believed God and they called for a fast, and they put on sack cloths, from the greatest to the smallest of them.'* Even the king, the most powerful man in the world at that time, *'got up from his throne' 'removed his robe', 'covered himself with sackcloth', and 'sat on the ash-heap'*. He commands the whole community to fast and pray; to *'turn back', 'each one from his bad way, and from the violence that is in his hands'*. *'Who knows?'* he says. *'God may turn and relent' and 'we will not perish'*.

And so, it happens. *'And God saw their deeds, because they turned from their bad way; and God relented from the bad that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it',* says the narrator.

I don't know about you, but to me, that such a curt message should ignite such immediate, widespread, and wholehearted repentance seems implausible – just think of how long it's taking our society to heed the warnings of climate science and repent of our destructive ways. The Ninevites' repentance sounds unlikely and exaggerated, and I think it's meant to, because ultimately this story isn't about their badness or their responsiveness. It's about the extent, the reach and extravagance of God's grace.

It's not that evil doesn't matter; it does, as is clear from the opening lines of this story – Jonah is commissioned to preach to Nineveh because, says YHWH, *'their wickedness has come up before me'*. Injustice, greed, corruption in any form concerns God. As even the king of Nineveh recognises, *all are commanded, 'each one', to turn back 'from the violence that is in their hands'*. How we relate to each other, and this world (its creatures and country) matters deeply. But this story

suggests that it is always possible to turn – to return – no matter who you are and how bad it's become. The grace of God extends to the ends of the earth and encompasses everyone. Jonah struggles to accept this. It's why he ran from his task, and why, as we'll see, his story is not yet finished, his own turning not yet complete. More of this next week.

For now, let's rest with the astounding and universalising insight of this ancient text that God is concerned with restoration of the whole world, loving and gracious to all. This is what connects Jonah to Advent and its celebration of God's coming in Christ to bring healing and hope. For, in the words of Zechariah – father of John the Baptist, whose story is often the focus in this second week of Advent: *'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'* (Luke 1:78-79). Amen.

References

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