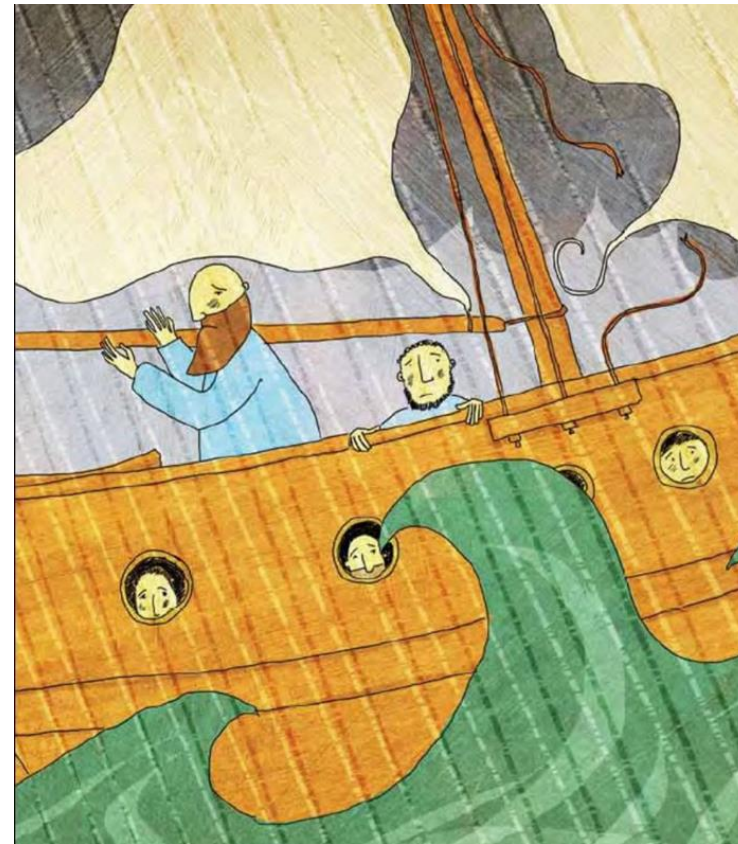


BEING A WHALE



Week 1: Through Jonah, God is reaching out to the conquering nation of Assyria one generation before the Israelites are sent into exile in their capital city of Nineveh, c. 722 BCE.

- Trying to forestall the exile??
- Trying to create a more humane Assyrian army/empire??
- Preemptively preparing a community of faith that will know the Hebrew God when the battered Israelites arrive.

Week 2: Jonah actively defied God and sailed west instead of hiking east.



God used a terrible storm to redirect Jonah.

Through no fault of their own, the ship's crew suffered along with Jonah.

The rescuing grace of God saves us whether it is our storm, or we are caught up in someone else's.

I want to note for the record that is actually *Jonah's* idea for the sailors to toss him overboard.

As you've seen already in his run to Tarshish, Jonah is something of a drama King. He couldn't just stay home and decline God's invitation to Nineveh. Jonah runs down to Pier 66 and gets on a cruise ship headed for Anywhere But Nineveh!

We'll see this same dramatic streak again before the story is over, when Jonah goes out to the desert to pout when Nineveh actually does repent. "I'd be better off dead!" he whines to God. "Just shoot me now!"

Here on the boat, drama king Jonah can't just have it out with God in his state room, committing himself to obedience, then directing the cox to have the rowers head for the port nearest Nineveh.

I think God would have honored that plan. The storm would have subsided just as readily as it blew up, Jonah could have gotten on with his work, and the sailors wouldn't have had to bear the terrible burden of forcing a man overboard in storm.

It is hugely problematic for me that Jonah put them in that position. “Toss me overboard, guys! I’m too stubborn to repent and too scared to jump, so just drown me now!”

One of the things Jonah’s story has to say to us is, don’t be that guy! Don’t put someone else in the hot seat when what you really need to do is to step up and take responsibility for your own stuff. Do the hard thing, face God, fix it, and get back to work!

Also, do not force God's hand the way Jonah did! Even Jesus declined to jump off a cliff and force God to save him.

But Jonah?? The drama king forces God to come up with an emergency plan to save him. So God uses the only resource available, a giant fish that happens to be swimming through the area.

She's an accidental hero, this fish. I imagine she was just as distressed as Jonah by their three long days and nights together. What are we going to do with her?

In one church I served, we studied Jonah for VBS and actually constructed a whale belly that involved our basement, a staircase, a slip and slide, salt water and seaweed.

It did not go down well with the building manager.

So, we're not going to recreate her, nor are we going to speculate on her species, or size or digestive system. But we are going to spend some time with her, this fish who was enlisted to give Jonah another chance. She only gets 3 verses in the whole book:

Jonah 1: 17 Then God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish's belly three days and nights.

2:1 Then Jonah prayed to his God from the belly of the fish.

2:10 Then God spoke to the fish, and it vomited up Jonah on the seashore.

Do you have any whales in your story? Anybody/anything who held you safely for just long enough for you to get clear with God and then get on with life? Maybe for an hour, or three days, or 3 years? Maybe they knew they were holding you up, and maybe they didn't even know you were there.

Be grateful for your whales! Make a list of them some time this week. They may have looked like teachers or doctors or nurses or parents or friends, but God knew you were drowning, and asked them to help.

Then, consider: Anybody you've been a whale for? Anybody near you now who needs a whale?

As I've been pondering this great good creature this week, I've begun to wonder if she isn't actually the hero in the story, and the best role model in the whole book.

What if we are all called to be whales, prepared to be used by God to help out the drowning people we encounter along the way? There are plenty of people in our world who have jumped ship or been pushed overboard!

All of us, at one time or another.

What if our primary work as Christians is to be whales, offering love, joy, and peace to drowning people? What if our work is to offer a safe place where people can catch their breath, engage with God, get reoriented and then get back to work?

The whale doesn't coach Jonah on how to pray, or give him advice. She just creates a space for Jonah's repenting and praying to happen. She keeps him safe while he figures out what he wants to say. She listens, perhaps, when he speaks. She points him in the right direction when he's ready, and then she lets him go.

What do you think? I had intended to dismiss the whale as a colorful prop, a distraction to the real story of Jonah that has gotten co-opted by too many children's books and puzzles and the whole Pinocchio story.

But she got me this week, like the sailors got me last week. I invite you to hang out with her for a while too.

She is an accidental hero, saving a drama king who wd rather die than face God. She provides a safe place, slimy and dark though it may be, where Jonah can reconsider, repent, and reorient his life. When he's ready, she sends him on his way.

He may, or may not, end up any closer to Nineveh by the time she leaves him on the seashore. It is his journey to make, not hers. She can't get him all the way to Nineveh any more than she can do his praying for him or change his mind. Her job isn't to scold him or set him straight.

I also appreciate that she didn't floss before catching Jonah, or do any deep cleaning. She doesn't stop swimming to help him out, or show him off to all the other whales as her good deed for the week.

The more time I spent with her, the more I learned. Hang out with her for a while this week and see what she says to you.

Also:

Look for a whale if you need one. God does NOT want you to drown, no matter how you ended up in deep water.

Is your head is still above water, or you are lucky enough to be on solid ground? Start paying attention to the people floating around you. Any Jonahs in your path?