

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Dark Places

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Quite a few years ago, while on vacation with my sons, Christopher and Andrew, we visited a cave in Missouri. It was a hot, July day and going into the cave's constant mid-60's, low humidity climate sounded like a great idea to us. We were instructed by our tour guide to form a single file line as the walkways were fairly narrow in spots. We were definitely in close quarters, but the cave was well-lit and nobody smelled bad, so it wasn't too creepy. As we walked, I remember putting one hand on Christopher and the other on Andrew. I'm not sure where I thought they were going to go, but I've learned over the years that my tendency to over parent knows no bounds.

The inside of the cave was really beautiful. The guide pointed out various geological details. He talked about how old the cave was and when it was first discovered. He shared a little about how the cave was made safe for visitors and how many people visit each year. At one point in the tour, he asked us all to stand still as the lights were turned off. I have never experienced such darkness. We couldn't see anything, not even right in front of our faces. The lights stayed off for a few minutes as the guide continued to talk about the cave's formation, but I wasn't listening to what he was saying. I was preoccupied with my efforts to *see* something. I kept waiting for my eyes to adjust, straining, trying to make out a shape or detect a little bit of light. It never happened. It was just plain dark.

Where have you experienced that kind of darkness?

This kind of darkness must have been what the author of Jonah imagined when he wrote the story. Two weeks ago, we read the beginning of Jonah's story where he ran away from God's call to go to Nineveh. In the process, he hopped a ship and fell asleep. He was eventually awakened by some very frightened shipmates who were praying to every god they could think of to calm the storm that was threatening to destroy their ship. Once awakened, Jonah confessed that it was probably his God, the God of Israel, the God of heaven and earth, who sent the storm, trying to get his attention since he had run from his call. The crew of the ship didn't want to harm Jonah, but they had no choice. The storm was going to destroy them all. You will remember we left Jonah, as he was being tossed overboard by his shipmates. We left him to think about what he had done.

*And this is where Jonah's story picks up:

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, ² 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.

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.

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!”

From the darkness of the sea to the darkness of the belly of a big fish. I have to believe, the darkness in the belly of a fish was more than the physical darkness of a cave or the lights going out during a thunderstorm. It was a lonesome, empty, regretful, fearful, deep in the soul darkness. It was the kind of darkness that feels claustrophobic, like it could smother a person. It’s the kind of darkness that would cause the one experiencing it to wonder if there is anything beyond it. Maybe darkness is all there is and ever will be.

That’s where Jonah found himself, having run away from his divine call. If we think about it, up until this point in the story, Jonah hadn’t done anything right. He ran from his call, fell asleep while others suffered because of him, and subsequently ended up fish food. But there, in the

darkness of the belly of the fish, Jonah finally did a thing...a good thing. He called out to God. And (most importantly). God. Answered. Him.

I mentioned two weeks ago that Jonah's story is not historical fact, but in it there is truth. One bit of truth we find is that, in the midst of our darkest darkness, God is there and where God is, there is always light and there is hope. I'm guessing none of us have experienced darkness in the literal belly of a fish, but I bet many of us have experienced darkness that felt like that, that was all around and seemed like it had no end.

*Jonah's story reminds us that the way back from darkness is God and wherever we end up, God is already there. "As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord...deliverance belongs to the Lord."

If we hang around this earth long enough, each one of us will experience "belly of a fish" darkness. I know that some of us already have. Some of us have experienced the darkness of addiction, hating the thing that controls every thought and every action. Others have experienced the darkness of racism, realizing that so much of life isn't about your worth as a child of God, created in God's image, or even about how hard you work or your own achievements, but about hatred and fear that continue to spark violence and reinforce systems of oppression and injustice.

Whether we want to believe it or not, our children (and all of us really) are experiencing the darkness of gun violence. My son and daughter-in-law bought our 6- year-old grandson a bullet proof backpack. Knowing the school would be talking to the students about safety and what to do in the event of an intruder, they talked to him about what to do if a "bad guy" comes to the school. They told him to listen carefully to his teacher's instructions and do what she says. They told him if he is told to run, to run as fast as he can. Do you know what my grandson said? "But what about the people who can't run fast? What will happen to

them?" Our children are being taught the world isn't safe. We have failed them.

Millions of people experience darkness in the form of mental illness. Sadly, many people do not have access to adequate mental health care and sadder still is the stigma that is attached to mental illness. I'm grateful to Larry Cowan and his team at Samaritan Counseling for the work they do in Bartlesville to provide compassionate, affordable mental health care. Still, for many of our neighbors, maybe for some of us here today, mental illness is incredibly lonely, frightening, and dark.

Truthfully, I haven't scratched the surface. Darkness is everywhere.

*But here's the rest of the truth, there is light and when we experience darkness, we have to be like Jonah and continue to believe in and be light. I mean light like thousands of people brought to Antonio Basco, who lost his wife, Margie Reckard in the El Paso Walmart tragedy. Margie was an employee of the Walmart, where she and 21 others were killed and more than two dozen were injured when a gunman opened fire on Aug. 3. Margie was Antonio's whole family. He has no other relative in the world, so he invited strangers to attend his wife's service and they did. They waited in line for hours for the opportunity to show Antonio that he is not alone. Because of them, Antonio didn't have to be alone in his grief.

Friends, this church is that kind of light. It is light to the ones who have been excluded by their families, the people they thought were their friends, and even by other churches. It is light to children and youth who have been bullied at school, who have doubts and questions, and who deserve stand-in grandparents and aunts and uncles to watch them act in plays, sing in musicals, compete in sports, and celebrate their accomplishments.

Bartlesville needs this light, not because our neighbors are in danger of eternal damnation if they don't join this church or any church, but because we are better together. We were created to be together. This church is light for everyone...for people who believe in God some of the time, none of the time, all of the time or haven't given it much thought. This church is light for people who are responsible gun owners and for people who hate guns and everyone in between. This church is light for Democrats and Republicans and Independents, and even people who have never voted...although I hope you will reconsider that. This church is light for people drowning in the world's darkness and it's our job to invite them in and figure out how to live together in community.

Step into the dark places where your family and friends and co-workers are living. Step into their grief, loneliness, anger, bitterness, fear and offer them light...yours and the light of this beautiful community. I promise...we will love them well. Amen.

Invitation-We Are Not Alone