

The sign of Jonah: the way up is down

Bible reading: 'Jonah and the Big Fish' from the Desmond Tutu Storybook Bible

I'm imagining the newspaper headlines from the Nineveh Gazette: *MAN SURVIVES THREE DAYS IN GIANT FISH / STORM SURVIVOR CLAIMS HE WAS EATEN BY WHALE / FISH-MAN SAVES NINEVEH FROM DESTRUCTION*

As we just heard from Vanda, the story of Jonah is a rather dramatic story.

The run-away prophet Jonah gets caught up in a huge storm and, at the point of drowning, is swallowed by a big fish, and spat out on the shores of Nineveh – exactly where he should have been going to start with. He shares God's message with the people, who repent and are saved.

There are lots of dramatic stories in the Bible, and many of them follow a similar pattern. Someone falls into a perilous situation, only to find themselves later in exactly the right place for what God wanted them to do.

Think of Joseph – he was thrown down a deep well by his jealous and murderous brothers, and after much suffering and many trials, he eventually ended up in exactly the right place in Egypt to save his family and lots of other people from a famine.

And did you know that Jeremiah the prophet was also thrown into a deep muddy cistern, by the civil leaders who didn't like his message. He was at risk of starving to death, but he was rescued and was able to continue his ministry. (Jeremiah 38:6-13).

And of course we know that the people of Israel had several experiences of being attacked and enslaved, eventually to be released and led back to freedom. (For instance, the Babylonian exile: 2 Chronicles 36:15-23).

As you can see: enslavement and exodus is the overarching story of Jewish history in the Old Testament.

The pattern of down and up, loss and renewal, enslavement and liberation, exile and return is quite clear in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Let's fast-forward to Jesus. Here's the scene: Jesus has just driven out a demon. A crowd is forming, but some onlookers are claiming he has power from the devil instead of from God. They want a sign. And how does Jesus respond?

Luke 11: 29-30: *²⁹ As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it **except the sign of Jonah.** ³⁰ For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.*

Jesus obviously saw something of himself in the story of Jonah. And so the story of Jonah can therefore teach us something about the good news of Jesus.

Let's take a look...

The story of Jonah and the life of Jesus follow similar patterns:

- Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish; Jesus was dead for three days in the tomb.
- Jonah was spat out (very much alive) onto the shores of Nineveh; Jesus was resurrected from death to life and walked out of the tomb.
- And why? God intended to save the Ninevites through Jonah, even though they had done terrible things; through Jesus, God wanted to save the world.

So we can see, Jonah in the belly of the whale is a metaphor for what would later become the doctrine of the cross.

The sign that Jesus chose to represent the mystery of transformation – for death and rebirth – is the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:39, 16:4; Luke 11:29).

So what does this mean for us?

First of all, this pattern of transformation feels very much like a mystery. This kind of faith is not logical or rational.

It's difficult for us to comprehend because it is counterintuitive. But this is Jesus' message: Mark 9: 35: *"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last"*. And John 12: 25: *Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

Very topsy-turvy!

Jesus tried to tell the disciples many times that this upside-down pattern was his destiny. For example, Mark 8:31: *"He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days"*. But the apostles misunderstood or rejected this message of transformation through darkness and suffering. (Mark 8:32, 9:32, 10:32).

In our culture, we are so used to trying to manage situations, to solve problems, to accumulate good things, to avoid suffering, and hide our struggles.

In the letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul wrote something quite different! He wrote about "reproducing the pattern" of Jesus' death and thus understanding resurrection. Philippians 3:10-11: *I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

This seems to the pattern that Christ was teaching and living:

We don't know resurrection until we have died.

The seed only sprouts a green shoot after it's been buried in the earth.

The way up is down.

Joseph down the well. Jeremiah down the cistern. Jonah drowning in the ocean. The Israelites in captivity. Jesus crucified and buried.

BUT, spending time in a fish belly is hardly pleasant. Nobody chooses to be thrown into a well or to go through pain, suffering or death.

More often than not, it's the circumstances of life that bring us to the belly of the beast. We find ourselves in a situation we can't fix, control, explain, or understand. Have you had such an experience?

Maybe for you, the Corona-Virus pandemic has been a Jonah experience.

Corona has been like a storm, and many of us have been unwillingly thrown overboard from the security of our normal lives. With all the uncertainties, challenges and sadness, we've found ourselves in a place where we've needed lots of faith. Where we've had to trust in the mystery of God's salvation. Where many questions have arisen, and answers are few. Where some days have felt without meaning.

And here, especially here, God's grace meets us. Because when we are led to the edge of our own resources, when we are no longer able to manage and control the situation, then we only have the hands of God to fall into.

In the depths of the sea, in the belly of the fish, in the darkness of the tomb, at the bottom of the well, when we've hit rock bottom... God's grace flows down to us.

And later, when we look back, we know that we found something firm beneath our feet. We realise there were glimpses of light. We remember a sense of presence. We are somehow more alert to the presence of God with us. We have been transformed.

This kind of transformation usually happens *not when something new begins but when something old falls apart*. The pain of something old falling apart—disruption and chaos—invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites the soul to go to a new place.

Because of Corona, we are different people.

Because of the struggles we have been through, we are transformed people.

We have been spat out by the whale onto a new shore.

We have been resurrected into new life.

But be patient! This grace-filled transformation takes time. God lets Jonah run in the wrong direction, until this reluctant prophet finds a long, painful, circuitous path to get back where he needs to be—in spite of himself!

And for Jonah, it even took a further experience of solitude and bitterness, as he tried to shelter under a withering vine, to bring him to accept God's mercy for the Ninevites and for himself. Nineveh was saved. And so, eventually, was Jonah.

I want to encourage you to trust that God's grace has reached you, especially in the moments when you've felt absolutely lost and alone.

Even if life feels disorienting, know that God sees you and is bringing you to new life, to new shores.

Whether we are in the storm, or sinking in the water, or in the belly of the fish, or spat out on a new shore... God is with us. God cares for us. And God will guide us on.

Amen