

Shipwrecked and Rescued: 1. Everyone Sinks

Jonah 1:4-16

June 10, 2018

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I want to tell you about my friend, Dan. Actually, everyone who know him, calls him Dr. Dan because he is a doctor. He's the kind of guy who, notices and engages with people whether he's working or not, it's just who he is. It's how he's wired up. And because of that, he is loved and adored by his patients, neighbors, family and friends. He has a beautiful wife, 2 adult children and 3 adorable grandchildren. He's a leader in the community and in his church. But in early 2013, Dan started experiencing unusual, concerning physical symptoms. He was dizzy, couldn't eat, and no matter how much he rested, he was constantly exhausted. He finally agreed to see a doctor-- several different doctors, actually. But they were never able to pinpoint anything that could be causing his problems. His symptoms continued to worsen and he continued to visit doctors, still with no answers. Until Sept of 2013, they sent him to Mayo Clinic where he saw 7 different specialists and underwent every kind diagnostic test imaginable. They poked and prodded, ran blood work, CAT scans, MRI, psych evaluation and still with no conclusive diagnosis. Their best and only advice was, "If it happens again, come back." So, Dan went home and went to bed. For days, he laid in bed, thinking. While the doctors didn't know what was wrong, Dan did. For years, he had been drinking excessively and hiding it from everyone. On Valentine's Day 2014, while lying in bed feeling even more alone and desperate, he heard a voice say, "Enough is enough." Even when recalling this story to me just this last week, it is still packed with emotion and difficult for him to say without tearing up. Hearing the voice of God will do that to you! So that day, Dan got out of bed, walked across the hall into their living room and said to his wife, "I need help. I'm an alcoholic."

It's not a matter of if but when we all find ourselves in a storm and end up shipwrecked and needing to be rescued. Sometimes storms come into our lives because of circumstances completely beyond our control. But there are times when we bring the storm on ourselves or at the very least, contribute to them and find ourselves in a place we don't want to be because of our own decisions and actions. But a shipwreck does not have to be the end of our story, the defining moment in life.

This is the first of a three message series where we were going to look at shipwrecks found in the Bible. Shipwrecks leave us feeling lost, lonely, hopeless and abandoned. Even the best and most faithful of us encounter storms in life and when we do, we wait for someone or something to come along and rescue us and restore us to the life we want. No one comes through these storms without being changed and that may actually be the Good News. Today we are going to take a look at the story of Jonah to see what lessons we can learn from this reluctant prophet and how to apply them to our lives today.

When reading scripture, I find it helpful to know when it was written and for whom it was written. The Old Testament book of Jonah was written in 8th century BC to the Israelites. The Assyrian city of Nineveh was a bitter enemy of Israel. The Assyrians had plundered Palestine, looting and burning its cities and deporting its inhabitants. In 722 BC the Northern Kingdom of Israel passed out of existence as a result of Assyrian conquests. In other words, to the hearers of the Jonah story, Nineveh was the object of intense hostility. This included Jonah. God said, "Go to Nineveh, Jonah" and Jonah said, "Anywhere but Nineveh, Lord!" Jonah argued with God and jumped on a ship headed in the opposite direction. Jonah was carrying a grudge for his ancestors. He was reluctant, withdrawn, and stubborn.

Yet, all throughout the Bible, we read about people who get up and go at a moment's notice. Abraham and Sarah moved out with a promise and a prayer. Moses headed out to Egypt with nothing but a shepherd's staff and his brother Aaron to write his sermons. In the New Testament, fishermen are dropping their nets and tax collectors are forgetting about debits and credits to follow Jesus. But not Jonah. Jonah, is as un-prophetic as one can possibly be. In fact, we might even call him an anti-prophet. It is almost as if God has skipped the vetting process entirely. Not only does Jonah lack the experience needed, he has no interest in, no passion for, and no demonstrated potential to be a prophet.

Nevertheless, the story has a prophetic flavor to it, beginning as many of the books of the prophets do, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh.'" Generally, when we hear these weighty opening words we can expect to hear something big from God through one of God's prophets. But not this time. Jonah doesn't even wait long enough to hear what he's supposed to say to the Ninevites before he takes off running in the opposite direction, hopping aboard a Tarshish-bound ship and hoping to get as far away from both Nineveh and God as he can. But God doesn't let Jonah go so easily. God pulls out all the stops; a mighty storm at sea, a whale, and miraculous survival; all to make sure that Jonah does what he has been asked to do.

Biblical scholars believe that this story is a story. It is not literal history. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann offers these words about the story of Jonah: "Critical scholars have long given up on the notion that the story of Jonah is historical. Rather, it is an artistic, imaginative creation designed to carry a message." A parable. Jesus used parables, he had about 40 of that he used to communicate the message of God's love and grace so that we might be rescued from living a life apart from God. Parables challenge our perspectives on life, love and faith and help us make sense of our world. And the story of Jonah pushes us to see how God often works with us in spite of ourselves! It's easy to blame Jonah for being petty, and angry and afraid but truthfully, we often do the same thing ourselves. The question for today is, can we lift up our eyes from our own concerns, just for a second, to see who and what God is sending into our lives to help us?

This society that we live in honors and admire self-made, independent people and so we often act and make decisions apart from God. When we blow it and make mistakes, we say "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps and next time, try to do better." But it's when we actually believe that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, without the grace of God that we find can ourselves at the bottom of the pit, or in the belly of a whale or wandering aimlessly in the desert.

Some Christians are all about preaching sin and guilt and they leave you leave feeling horrible about how bad you are and what you have done. You actually feel worse than when you started the conversation. But this is not reflective of the gospel that we find in the scriptures. The message of Jesus is not one of guilt and sin but one of grace, mercy and forgiveness. Philosopher and theologian, Paul Tillich said this;

"Forgiveness is a divine answer to the questions implied in our existence." As human beings, we're going to fail. We're going to fall and falter and do things that are not right. We are going to get lost and shipwrecked. That's just a part of who we are as humans and that alienates us from God and from one another. But our God is a god of forgiveness and takes great delight in rescuing us and bringing us back to dry land.

I have to admit. I can kind of relate to Jonah. There was a period in my life, not so long ago when I was also reluctant to follow God's call in my life-call to a pastoral ministry. In 2008, I had a profound experience where I knew heard God calling me into pastoral ministry. But like Jonah, I didn't want to go anywhere. I wanted to stay at my home church and be a pastor. So I waited. And

I waited and I waited. I kept telling God that I'd answer the call, if I could do it my way. But in the summer of 2015, after seven years of waiting and bargaining with God still nothing happening, I hit bottom and through deep discernment, prayer, tears and I can honestly say, by the grace of God, I was finally able to let go of all of my demands and arguments and walk forward, one baby step at a time, into my call to ministry. Even in the midst of my selfishness and spiritual pouting, while trying to work my own life plan, God graciously came to me, scooped me up and placed me on dry land proving that God's forgiveness is stronger than my sin. God's mercy is greater than guilt.

I don't know the nature of your shipwreck. Only you do. Maybe it's involves hurtful words spoken to a family member, friend or coworker. Perhaps it has to do with a financial decision or substance abuse or greed or envy or lust. I don't know what it is but I am guessing you do. You know what it is that has you shipwrecked. But no matter how alone, abandoned, unlovable you feel, help is not far off.

The parable of the lost sheep provides us with an intimate view of the God who pursues us relentlessly and lovingly.

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' Luke 15:4-6.

Though God intended for us to live a life filled only with purpose and meaning, this became impossible when sin entered the world. The apostle Paul, says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). On our own we are lost and aimless. We wander around in a desert wasteland or on a deserted island, trying to find our own way. But we all need to be rescued. God's rescue is personal. No matter how many people there are in the world, God takes personal delight in you and in me. It doesn't matter if there are still 99 other sheep. The fact is, every one of God's sheep is special and important to the flock. Leaving 99 sheep to go and find one sheep is the quickest way to be a shepherd of one because sheep are not smart creatures and they wander when left unattended. But it doesn't matter to the Great Shepherd if there is 1/100 or 1/million gone missing, God will go and find that one lost sheep. Because without that one sheep, without you, without me, the flock is incomplete, the fold is inadequate. Therefore God is willing to do whatever it takes, to set aside vocation and livelihood to find that one lost sheep.

This is how God sees us, loves us, and searches for us when we are lost, regardless of circumstances, regardless of consequences, so that each one of us can be rescued, carried back to the flock on the shepherd's shoulders and made whole. If this shepherd can search out and save the least and the lost and throw a massive party when his flock is brought to completion, imagine how much more God will celebrate when one person turns and says “ok, I'll go.” Even when we have given up on ourselves, when we make choices in life that feel like game enders and we can't find it within ourselves to forgive and love ourselves, God will pursue you relentlessly, tenderly and joyfully. God is so crazy about you that even if you were the only one on the planet God would still run after you. God loves you with an everlasting love, so much so that God gave up His son to pursue you.

Perhaps your life is going pretty great right now. Its sunny skies and smooth sailing for you these days with no shipwreck even on the horizon. If this is the season of life in which you find yourself

right now, then I challenge you to imagine yourself in the shepherd's shoes. When is the last time you took stock of your fold? When is the last time you looked around to see whose missing? From your family, neighborhood, community or church? Are you willing to love those who are not here? Are we willing to search them out, meet them where they are, put them on our shoulders and carry them back in? In this parable, Jesus is challenging us to love others in that way. And when we do, we will finally love each other the way that God first loved us.

What about you? I know when I pay attention, I am constantly amazed by God's passionate pursuit of me. And my friend, Dan? After 30 days at Hazelden and 16 weeks in outpatient program, Dan is still sober today. But it's not been an easy. He told me that gets up every day and intentionally places his trust and hope in God for one more day of sobriety. And what about Jonah? Well, I wish I could tell you that our friend Jonah also had a happy ending to his story. I encourage you to read the rest of the story. It's a short book, only 4 chapters long to see for yourself the people and things that God brings into Jonah life in an effort to rescue him. So, what about you? I pray that you are so moved by God's great love for you that it motivates you to stop running and say "Ok, I'll go." or "I need help". To stand in the shoes of the shepherd and seek out the lost and be assured that no matter what is happening in your life, God will never give up on rescuing you.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 10, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Loving God, you call to the lost, the least, and all who long for home. You pursue me when I wander from the path and waste the gifts I have been given. Thank you for rescuing me and welcoming me back into your fold. I will celebrate and rejoice in your presence forever. Amen.

Monday, June 11

Scripture: Psalm 130:1-8

I cry out to you from the depths, Lord, my Lord, listen to my voice. Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy! If you kept track of sins, Lord, my Lord, who would stand a chance? But forgiveness is with you that's why you are honored. I hope, Lord. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise. My whole being waits for my Lord more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning! Israel, wait for the Lord! Because faithful love is with the Lord; because great redemption is with our God! He is the one who will redeem Israel from all its sin.

Observation: This psalmist knew the awful sense of despair that comes when we realize we've completely failed to be the good person we want to be. He described it as crying out to God "from the depths," pleading for God's mercy. But it was not a hopeless cry. The psalm repeated (for emphasis) the image of watchmen waiting in the darkness for the first gleam of morning light. That was how eagerly the psalmist waited for God's mercy—and he trusted that God's forgiveness was just as dependable as each day's dawn.

Application: Verse 3 said, "If you kept track of sins, Lord—my Lord, who would stand a chance?" Have you ever pictured God as meticulously keeping track of all your sins? Compare Psalm 103:10, 12: "He doesn't deal with us according to our sin.... As far as east is from west—that's how far God has removed our sin from us." What do these poetic images tell you about how profoundly God longs to forgive you?

Prayer: Like the psalmist, “I hope, Lord.” At all the times when I realize that I cannot count on my own good intentions, I’m so grateful that I can count on your forgiving love. Amen.

Tuesday, June 12

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-9

All of you who are thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat! Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk! Why spend money for what isn’t food, and your earnings for what doesn’t satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts. Listen and come to me; listen, and you will live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful loyalty to David. Look, I made him a witness to the peoples, a prince and commander of peoples. Look, you will call a nation you don’t know, a nation you don’t know will run to you because of the LORD your God, the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you. Seek the LORD when he can still be found; call him while he is yet near. Let the wicked abandon their ways and the sinful their schemes. Let them return to the LORD so that he may have mercy on them, to our God, because he is generous with forgiveness. My plans aren’t your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.

Observation: Forgiveness is not first and foremost a human impulse, a sociological way to get along. Living surrounded by cultures in which “revenge” was the dominant way of handling failures and conflicts, the prophet Isaiah pointed out that forgiveness is not “natural” to us at all. But, he added, God is “generous with forgiveness” precisely because God’s ways are higher than ours.

Application: Whether in global politics, business or legal settings, or even in family or community disputes, people sometimes view forgiveness as a sign of “weakness.” How do you react inwardly when Isaiah says God’s mercy and pardon are a “higher” way than the usual human response? Think about a time when someone forgave you. Did it make you think less or more of the person who forgave you?

Prayer: Lord of all, in the face of wrong, I too often want to “get even.” Thank you that your ways are higher than mine and that you are generous with forgiveness. Amen.

Wednesday, June 13

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 7:8-11

Even though my letter hurt you, I don’t regret it. Well—I did regret it just a bit because I see that that letter made you sad, though only for a short time. Now I’m glad—not because you were sad but because you were made sad enough to change your hearts and lives. You felt godly sadness so that no one was harmed by us in any way. Godly sadness produces a changed heart and life that leads to salvation and leaves no regrets, but sorrow under the influence of the world produces death. Look at what this very experience of godly sadness has produced in you: such enthusiasm, what a desire to clear yourselves of blame, such indignation, what fear, what purpose, such concern, what justice! In everything you have shown yourselves to be innocent in the matter.

Observation: After a time of tension, the apostle Paul told Christians in Corinth that “godly sadness,” which led to positive change, was not like “sorrow under the influence of the world,” which left people stuck in guilt feelings that led to death. Christian counselor Bruce Narramore wrote about the difference Paul described: “Guilt feelings are punitive. Constructive sorrow is

loving. In psychological guilt we take the initiative to punish ourselves. In constructive sorrow we respond because God has taken the initiative.”

Application: “Sorrow under the influence of the world” (today we might call it “psychological guilt”) means punishing ourselves by hanging onto feelings of guilt and shame. How can these feelings keep us from taking positive steps toward healing? When might we need the spiritual discipline of counseling to help us recognize and live beyond that destructive kind of sorrow? In what ways, physical and spiritual, was Paul right in saying that this kind of sorrow brings death?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I’m sorry for the times when I fail you and hurt myself and others. Guide me in making that sorrow a godly sorrow that produces genuine change, not just misery and continued guilt. Amen.

Thursday, June 14

Scripture: Luke 15:3-7

Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn’t he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

Observation: Pastor Bruce Larson wrote, “A shepherd once explained to me that sheep nibble their way into lostness. They move from one tuft of green grass to the next, sometimes right through a hole in the fence. When they’re done nibbling, they can’t find the hole and they’re lost. Some of us know what that is—to nibble ourselves bit by bit into the far country.”

Application: When have you been like the lost sheep, not sure how to find your way home? What “shepherd(s)” has God used to find you and bring you home?

Prayer: O Jesus, thank you for seeking and finding me, for being “thrilled” and placing me on your shoulders! Give me eyes to see others who long for you to find them and to draw them into your great heart of steadfast love. Amen.

Friday, June 15

Scripture: 1 John 1:5-2:2

This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you: “God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.” If we claim, “We have fellowship with him,” and live in the darkness, we are lying and do not act truthfully. But if we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin. If we claim, “We don’t have any sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong. If we claim, “We have never sinned,” we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

My little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you don't sin. But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is God's way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world.

Observation: John said, "If we claim 'We don't have any sin,' we deceive ourselves." Sometimes inner blindness, fear or stubborn pride makes us deny that we need mercy. But when we assess ourselves as honestly as possible, and confess the broken, sinful places in our lives, John assured us that forgiveness is always there. Jesus, he said, "is God's way of dealing with our sins."

Application: Many of us struggle with a sense that, "I can never forgive myself for _____." John echoed his master Jesus in teaching that God is willing to forgive anything we're willing to acknowledge as needing forgiveness. If our hearts condemn us, he said, we must trust God rather than our feelings (1 John 3:19-20). Where do you need to trust, to rest in God's forgiveness today?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, there's no darkness in you—but, sadly, there is in me. Give me the courage to honestly face my flaws and weak spots, and to bring them to you for forgiveness. Amen.

Saturday, June 16

Scripture: John 3:14-21

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son. "This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. All who do wicked things hate the light and don't come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

Observation: Pastor Adam Hamilton wrote, "More than any other world religion, Christianity teaches, preaches, veritably shouts forgiveness. Yes, some of our preachers dwell too long on guilt...That is unfortunate, for a Christianity obsessed with guilt is no Christianity. Christianity is a faith whose central focus is not guilt, but grace, redemption, healing, forgiveness, and mercy." John said that, though too many people think Christianity is about condemnation, Jesus did not come to judge the world. When we internalize that truth, it frees us to let go of our condemning attitude toward ourselves and others.

Application: How do you understand the meaning of "God so loved the world...God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world"? In what ways have you been able to make God's forgiveness, not an abstract "church" idea, but a transforming, freeing personal reality in your life? What is one specific relationship in which you will begin or deepen the process of moving more fully into the freedom of a forgiven, forgiving life in the weeks ahead?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you knew the brokenness, shallowness and ugliness of our world much more clearly than I do. Yet you came not to judge, but to save, to offer me grace. Help me grow daily in my ability to do the same. Amen.