

Bless Our Hearts

If Jonah is a limited run series on Apple or Hulu, last week's time in chapter 1 was the pilot. We were given a little bit of a backstory: God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah hightails it in the opposite reaction and winds up on a boat to Tarshish. God sends a storm. The others are frightened while Jonah sleeps. They decide together that Jonah is the problem, so the sailors eventually agree to toss him overboard. And Jonah winds up in the belly of a big fish, or as we learned as children, a whale.

Last week at our evening Selah service, we heard the first two chapters—or episodes—of the Jonah story from the whale's perspective. Before Jonah arrives, Whale has a family, Whale has a song to sing, and Whale happily plays in the sea splashing boats and soaking the sailors' lunches. Whale enjoys a good life filled with gifts from God. One evening a storm blows in:

Whale heard the groaning of a boat...the moaning of men shaken and afraid. Whale followed the sound.¹

We know what happens next, of course. Jonah comes flying overboard. [Read Jonah 1:17-2:10]

In the storybook version, Whale hears God speak directly to him:

'Save the man Jonah.'

¹ *Jonah's Whale* by Eileen Spinelli with illustrations by Giuliano Ferri

Whale had never saved a drowning man before. He opened his mouth as it to swallow a thousand tiny fish and--*sluuuuuuurp!* went the man Jonah...²

In the way of many children's books, this version gives us an imaginative view behind the scenes, a different window into the story, which is helpful, because my take on this story has been all over the place this week. Last Sunday I felt tremendous empathy for Jonah. Who wouldn't run in the opposite direction when asked to do such a difficult thing? As we sat around the table at bible study, we were still feeling empathetic, wanting to give Jonah the benefit of the doubt, the generous read as one of my seminary professors encouraged. Earlier in the week, I could have sworn that Jonah confessed in the midst of this psalm-like prayer, along with offering thanksgiving and praise. And even upon a closer look, those of us who were walking through this text word by word and line by line on Wednesday really wanted to see him in the best light. We wanted Jonah to have learned his lesson, to be genuinely repentant, to have become as devout and as faithful as the sailors on that groaning boat in chapter 1. So I and we read the psalm through those eyes, and then I delved more deeply into some of what scholars have to say. My goodness, some of them really don't like old Jonah.

And this psalm is where they begin to build their case. Early on, the speaker—Jonah states that he called out to the Lord. At least one scholar, Phyllis Trible begs to differ.³ The pagan sailors called out to all the gods they could think of, and then they called out to Jonah's God. Jonah—at least as we read in the text—does not call out to any god at all, despite what he claims in the psalm. In the psalm, Jonah asserts that God cast him into the sea. Ummm, no. In

² Spinelli

³ Phyllis Trible, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. vii, Abingdon, 1996, 505.

last week's episode, we saw the sailors do that and only after Jonah insisted. Jonah's psalm reflects the tradition he has been raised in and shaped by. His words echo some of the most beloved and poignant psalms, songs and prayers written by a community that knows what it is to lament, to rage, to despair. This community also knows what it looks and sounds like to offer praise and thanksgiving. This community knows what it means to confess. Another piece of Jonah's psalm that raises scholars' eyebrows is the fact that he doesn't confess. As Dr. Carol Bechtel writes:

Under the circumstances, we might expect a confession of sin to precede this prayer of thanksgiving. I suppose we could assume the waves and billows were still passing over [Jonah]. Still, this prophet does not seem particularly contrite, and the bible does not record any such confession. All we get is, in essence, 'Whew, thanks for getting me out of that!'⁴

Bechtel seems a bit more amused than irritated by Jonah. She hails from Michigan, but I'm fairly certain she would offer at least one "Bless your heart," in Jonah's direction if she still lived in Richmond, Virginia where I had her as a seminary professor. A particularly southern exclamation, "Bless your heart (or his heart or their heart or her heart)" is loaded. It is of course a way of indirectly saying that someone is utterly ridiculous, but it can be more nuanced than that too. This phrase can convey genuine concern as well as frustration or exasperation all wrapped up in a tidy bundle:

He still doesn't know how to parallel park, bless is heart.

⁴ Carol Bechtel, *Above and Beyond: Hearing God's Call in Jonah and Ruth*, 2007-2008 Horizons Bible Study, 19.

Bless her heart, she is only three and she is determined to ride her tricycle to pre-school, bless her heart.

They think the Panthers can win the Super Bowl next season, bless their hearts.

“Bless his heart” could apply in the case of Jonah’s prayer. While some scholars want to write Jonah off as brazenly performative, praying what he thinks he should pray, others determine that he is blatantly hypocritical for wrongly touting his own faithfulness. Bechtel on the other hand wonders if God smiles at Jonah’s prayer as he prays in the dark. She writes:

When Jonah prays from the belly of the fish, he is ‘praying in the dark,’ literally and figuratively. If he knows his prayer is amusing, he doesn’t let on. Moreover, he seems utterly insensible to the irony of thanking God for thwarting the very thing Jonah had set out to do—namely escape from the presence of the Lord.⁵

Bechtel wonders if our prayers make God smile, too. I’m fairly sure God smiles or even shakes the divine head when he hears at least some of my well-intentioned prayers, too. I don’t always know what I truly need or what is exactly right for me or anyone else. Nor do I readily acknowledge the many ways I do what God asks me not to do or confess all the ways I fail to do what God calls me to do. When I pray for peace, for comfort, for guidance, for courage, I often have something specific in mind, and as well-meaning as I may be, I could be off base. Goodness knows my perspective is limited and my vision a bit skewed. I mean well. I really do. Bless my heart. As Bechtel suggests:

⁵ Bechtel, 20.

Like Jonah, we pray in the dark, not always knowing what is good for us [or for others, I might add]. Maybe [she writes] that's why Jesus put that all-important proviso into the Lord's Prayer: ***Thy will be done.***⁶

So often I want to advise God in my praying, to serve as God's consultant on what exactly God's will could be, bless my heart. In praying that God's will be done, perhaps I am nudged just a bit to consider and reconsider over and over again what God's will might actually be.

Toward the end of worship, some of our young friends will help me lead the Lord's Prayer, which they have memorized during Pew Prep over the past year. If you listen closely each Sunday, you will hear their young voices praying this ancient, beloved prayer from their hearts with joy and conviction. I hope they always will. I hope we will, too. Even when it is so very hard to trust God's will. Especially when it is so very hard to trust God's will.

Just before he is so unceremoniously belched onto the beach, Jonah declares: "Deliverance belongs to the Lord!". And he is exactly right. Deliverance—or salvation as it can also be translated—is God's work, God's doing. As I have said more than once, we do not and cannot save ourselves—whether we find ourselves wrapped in seaweed or in the belly of a whale or not. And so we help one another by continuing to thank God, and praise God. Together, we keep confessing, keep wondering, keep listening, keep trying to align our work and our wills with God's. And we keep praying, "*Thy will be done.*" Sometimes, we will get it right and sometimes, we will blow it spectacularly, bless our hearts. And God promises to keep nudging, to keep calling us back, to keep leading us forward. All the while, God keeps working

⁶ Bechtel, 20.

on us and with us, because God remains determined to deliver us, to save us no matter how often we cause God to smile or shake his head or think to God's self, "Bless their hearts."

Let us pray:

Patient and merciful God, we do not know how to pray as we ought. Help us to want the right things [for others and for ourselves]. Help us to pray "Thy will be done" and mean it. And when your answer to our prayers is no, help us to trust that you love us and want only the best for us. [Bless us, O God, even as you bless our hearts.] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.⁷

⁷ Bechtel, 20.