

In The Belly Of A Whale  
Jonah 2  
October 25, 2009

Tonight is the Halloween Hoot. This is one of several community events that are held for the citizens of Beverly Hills. Though I will not be in Beverly Park for this event I was there for the last one. I was there on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July selling popcorn for the Berkshire Dads Club.

If you have been there on the 4<sup>th</sup>, you know there are several food booths, some rides for the kids and several games. As I stood there by the popcorn I began to see the prize for one of the games. A number of children were walking around with a baggie filled with water. Water however was not the only thing in the bag. Guess what was in the water? A goldfish!

I'm curious, has anyone here ever been surprised by his or her children with a gold fish? Any other animals your children brought home as a candidate for a pet?

I have been preaching a sermon series that is based on pets. So far we have looked at dogs and cats. I have to say I have enjoyed hearing your stories about your pets. Today we finish this series by addressing the fish.

This past week I was out to visit Dagmar June. When I mentioned this sermon series she informed me that when her son was young he had a number of fish. In fact, I believe she said she had six (6) fish tanks in her home.

While growing up my brothers and I had several gold fish. They never seemed to live very long. Unlike several friends who had filters and heaters for their tanks, we just had a bowl. I always thought the bowl caused the early demise for my fish. When I first dated Elizabeth however she had a gold fish. That fish was several years old. What did that gold fish live in? A bowl!

The one fish we owned that lived the longest was a bullhead that we scooped out of a lake. Like the goldfish in a bag, we brought it home and my parents had no choice.

When I decided to use the fish as my third subject in this series, I was challenged to figure out what direction I wanted to head.

When I think of fish in the Bible there are several references I thought of. There is Jesus calling James and John to become fishers of man. This story not only describes how Jesus recruited his disciples, it is a reminder to us that we too are to be fishers of people.

There is another incident with Jesus that involves a fish. Do you remember when a tax collector comes looking to collect from Jesus? What did Jesus do? He told his disciple to go to the water where he proceeded to catch a fish. Inside the fish's mouth was a coin that covered the amount of the tax.

Though those are nice stories, they do not top the popularity of Jonah and the whale/big fish. I'm sure we are all familiar with the story of the prophet Jonah, who rather than going to Nineveh as God directed, headed to Joppa. While at sea there was a big storm. After being thrown overboard Jonah is swallowed by a big fish. Jonah is eventually spit up on land and goes to Nineveh. In Nineveh he challenges the people to repent or else suffer God's wrath.

There is a movie that came out about Jonah. Done by the makers of Veggie Tales, it is a funny musical take on the story. I have asked Connie to sing a song from the sound track. The song is titled "In The Belly of the Whale."

In The Belly of a Whale! This is the concept I would like us to consider.

First, how did Jonah get into the belly? Instead of doing what God told him to do, Jonah did something else.

If we think of the term "belly of a whale" as a reference to being in trouble, then we too can think of times when we were in the "belly of a whale". Sometimes circumstances or bad luck put us in that situation. My guess would be that there were other times when our own bad choices put us in the "belly of a whale".

Have there been times when we knew what we should have done, what God would have wanted us to do, but instead we chose something else? At first we may benefit from the choice. Everything seems to have worked out. The

lying, cheating, manipulating, stealing, all have improved our lot in life. But then the storm comes!

On a grand scale there are the Bernie Madoffs of the world. People who take advantage of others, break the law, and think they can get away with it. Where is Mr. Madoff today? In the belly of a whale called jail.

On a smaller scale are the many folks that got caught up in greed and bought expensive homes with little or nothing down. The intent was never to live in the home or condo, but to flip it and make a killing. When the market cooled they were left with homes they could not afford. The end result - "Foreclosure"!

In the belly of a whale! Not a good place to be! There is however another way to look at that phrase. Though not the best place to be, for Jonah it was better than the alternative. Jonah would have drowned if it were not for the whale.

Maybe there might be times when the mess we find ourselves in is better than other alternatives.

At this point it's all a matter of perspective. We may believe things couldn't get worse, but if we had a broader view, then we would realize the belly we find ourselves in is manageable.

Are you familiar with S.O.S., South Oakland Shelter?

The South Oakland Shelter is a program that provides help for the homeless. Churches sign up to host the program for a week. Every night men, women, and children are brought to the church. At the church the guests receive a dinner and a mat to sleep on. In the morning breakfast is served. A lunch is given to the guests as they leave the church.

If you were in the program, it would probably feel like you are in the belly of the whale. Here you are homeless, sleeping with a bunch of strangers on the floor of some church fellowship hall.

Though not where these men or women ever thought they would wind up, they are out of the elements, nourished by 3 meals a day, encouraged by the volunteers of the churches, and assisted by social workers to find a job and secure a place to live.

Thankfully many of the participants in the S.O.S. Program get their lives in order. The guests go from being in the belly of a whale to independent living.

Jonah also didn't stay in the fish. The belly was just a temporary place for him.

When we find ourselves in a bad spot, rather than giving up, we must keep hopeful that things will change. For you see in that belly with us is God our Creator.

Even though Jonah disobeyed God and deserved punishment, God did not abandon Jonah. It was God who caused the fish to swallow Jonah.

When we sin, when we do things we shouldn't God keeps on loving us. As Romans says, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

When you find yourself in the belly of a whale, try to remember God is with you. God loves you. If we can gain strength and hope from that faith, then we can hold on and make it out of the situation we find ourselves in.

I mentioned Romans just a few moments ago. I would like you to pick up a pew Bible and turn it to page 211 in the New Testament. Romans 8:35. "Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ?" Let us read together verses 37 through 39.

If you have never memorized these two verses, I suggest you might try it. With those words ingrained in your memory, you can recite them whenever you find yourself in the belly of a whale.