

“Changing the Focus”

Jonah 3:10-4:11

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September 27, 2020

You are welcome to disagree with me, but I state bold in the claim that the fish that swallowed Jonah is one of the most important Biblical characters, and we do not talk about that poor fish with a bad case of indigestion nearly enough. We are quick to focus on Jonah and his stubbornness, or quick to explore the change of hearts of the people of Ninevah, but why does the great big fish get neglected? They changed the whole arc of the story!

God told Jonah to go visit the people of Nineveh and give them a warning about their behavior. Jonah did not want to go so he ran away, on a ship. When storms followed him and threatened the safety of the boat, Jonah's shipmates tossed him overboard. It was then that a large fish, often described as a whale, swallowed Jonah up. Jonah had nothing to do but sit in the belly of the fish and think about what he had done, or more accurately, not done.

After Jonah repents and promises to listen to God, the story says my favorite line: God spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out on the dry land. God spoke to the fish! We always think about God speaking to people, about God speaking to *us*, but this one little line is our reminder that God also speaks to animals. Although it is not specified, I imagine that God also spoke to the fish *before* it swallowed Jonah. No matter what the movie *Jaws* says, I don't think it is normal behavior for a fish to swallow a human. So, I imagine there must have been a conversation out in the middle of the sea between God and the fish. It probably went a lot like the conversation God had with Jonah—God would have explained to the fish that there was a man, a prophet, who wasn't listening to God's instructions, and God needed the fish to help God teach Jonah a lesson.

For me, the fish adds an important element to the story. The fish is a humbling reminder to

Jonah that God can move through anyone or anything. I imagine that part of the reason why Jonah was so brazen that he disobeyed God was that his ego had become inflated. Perhaps as his gifts of prophecy grew stronger as he became more comfortable in his work of speaking to crowds of people and interpreting God's will for them.

The thing about prophets is that their gifts come from God—they are only as powerful as their connection to God is strong. Jonah likely started to think he was solely responsible for his own success; that he knew as much or more than God and no longer needed to listen to him. He challenged God's decisions and directions, thinking he could outsmart the holiest of holies, the one who created the whole world. Challenging God isn't bad—but I think it has to be a conversation. Jonah ran away, refusing to face God and refusing to find a resolution.

The fish is Jonah's reminder that what he was given was indeed a gift. It was Jonah's reminder that God can choose to use another creature just as easily as Jonah was chosen to do God's work. The fish is Jonah's reminder that when he starts to think he is more important than anyone else, even a fish can do the job he was once given. There is nothing too exotic about a big fish—especially from the inside of its belly. I don't think it was meant to be menacing or threatening of Jonah's life. Jonah was sentenced to sit and be still, surrounded by the fish, with nowhere to go. That is a very big lesson on pride for him—God chose to speak through Jonah, and God can just as easily choose to speak through someone or something else.

For me, today, the fish that swallowed up Jonah as a favor to God offers me a different perspective. So often when we hear stories, even Bible stories, we relate to the main character—the hero doing the right thing or the shlub who is can't seem to do anything right. We put ourselves in the center of the story and look out from that vantage point. There are certainly times in our lives when this is right—there are highs and lows when it feels like things are circling around our experiences or one particular moment. It feels like we are the hero or the main character playing out a role in our life. It

feels like we are the Jonah with a big lesson to learn and like everyone around us is waiting for us to get it right.

But that is only some of the time. I think that on most of our days, we are more of a background character. We play a supporting role to the people in our lives as they take their turn with big moments and difficult decisions—learning the lessons of life and sometimes getting it right, sometimes failing spectacularly. I think on most days in our lives we are like the fish—God is talking to us and using us to help others, but we aren't necessarily center-stage. Sometimes we are in the background, helping out, trying to listen. Sometimes, we are called to play a role in someone else's story. I like that Jonah isn't the only character in the story—I like the fish's steadfast presence, working quietly, not always noticed but still important. Jonah may have eventually learned to listen to God, but it wouldn't have been as memorable without the large fish to swallow him up.

The fish reminds me that it isn't always about me. By using a fish, we are taught that it isn't even all about us humans. There are other animals at play. There are other characters in the story of our world. We are but one perspective. We are but one way that God is talking to and through us. That fish reminds me that even if you don't say a word, you can make a very big impact.