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SERMON

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Out of the Deep

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Jonah 2:1-9

When I was in high school, I had a nasty little habit of driving my car, or more accurately my mom's car, a bit too quickly; and one evening during Christmas break I was pulled over for speeding on the highway and was given a relatively hefty ticket. I had a job and, though unhappy about the whole thing, was able to pay the ticket. Fortunately, my mom played the "at least no one was hurt and hopefully you learned your lesson" card, and we moved on with life.

A few weeks later I received in the mail a letter from the state police. As it turns out, because I had exceeded the speed limit to the degree that I had, and because I was not yet 18 years old, my driver's license was to be suspended for 90 days the spring of my senior year in high school. I distinctly remember calling my mom, who was still at work, and simply raging over the fact that the police officer who pulled me over didn't let me know about this little detail. How could he have misinformed me? How could he mislead me? How could he do

this to me? This was all his fault! Which is, of course, absurd. There was no blame to be cast anywhere but squarely onto my own shoulders. This was my own mess, and I was about to bear the weight of consequence.

It was absurd for me to cast blame – but I did it anyway; and it’s a pattern that we see just about everywhere in our world today. A student claims that she received the grade that she did because “the teacher doesn’t like me.” A fan claims that their team lost the game because, “that coach doesn’t know what he’s doing.” A politician claims that all of your woes are the result of “the other party’s policies.” Anywhere we see an outcome that isn’t to our liking, we’re pretty quick to point out blame and fault.

Likely because this pattern is so familiar to us, I found myself asking the same question when I reread the book of Jonah in preparation for this message. The book of Jonah encapsulates just four short chapters of the entirety of the Bible, but has managed to become one of my very favorite

places to return time and again. It holds me accountable the decisions I make. It challenges me to remember who I am in relationship to God and to others, and each time I return to it, I find that it has spoken to me in new ways.

Many of us are likely familiar with the basics: Jonah ended up in the ocean, and got swallowed by a fish. Outside of that my hunch is that we might be sort of foggy on the rest, so here's the story of Jonah in a nutshell. God calls Jonah to go to an enormous and powerful city called Nineveh to preach the word of God because the city had fallen into a state of wickedness. Instead, Jonah literally turns 180 degrees in the opposite direction and heads by boat for a town called Tarshish, literally telling people along the way that he is "running from the Lord."

Shortly into the journey, scripture tells us that "The Lord sent a great wind on the sea" that threatens to sink the boat and all the people that it carries. Jonah, knowing that he has chosen to ignore the call of God looks to the sailors, and

claims “this is my fault – throw me overboard and the storm will pass.” The sailors, reluctant to participate in what for all intents and purposes might be murder, unenthusiastically throw Jonah overboard and the storm calms. As Jonah is sinking into the sea, we’re told that “the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah,” and he prays the prayer that we read just a few minutes ago.

Jonah, as the text so eloquently states it, is “vomited” back onto dry land by the fish, and seemingly have learned his lesson, heads directly to Nineveh to preach the word of God. Upon hearing the word of God, and God’s message for the town, the king of Nineveh immediately issues a decree that everyone, “Call urgently on God and give up their evil ways and their violence.” God, seeing this repentance from the people of Nineveh, shows them mercy, and the story ends with Jonah, who had himself received great compassion from God, arguing that God was somehow too compassionate with the people of Nineveh.

Now each section of this story is packed with nuance, and complexity that simply can't fit into one sermon, so please go, and read it for yourself; as I've already said once this morning, every time I read this story it speaks to me in new ways. This time through, focusing on Jonah's prayer from within the huge fish, I found myself pondering blame and fault. Who caused all of this to happen? Whose fault is it that Jonah finds himself at death's doorstep, swallowed by a fish and sinking into the sea?

Well, perhaps obviously my mind first drifts to Jonah himself. Had he not ignored the call of God, had he instead been faithful to the task that God had requested, perhaps he wouldn't have found himself in this mess in the first place. He even seems to assent to this blame himself while he and the other sailors are being beaten by the storm. Maybe this was Jonah's fault. Doing my best to practice some critical thinking skills, I pressed myself a bit further.

Could this be the fault of the sailors? They seem to be fully aware that they are, for all intents and purposes, committing murder. They preemptively pray for forgiveness as they hoist Jonah's body over the sides of the boat and into the sea. Could it be that that they were just being too selfish? Did they place too much value on their own safety and comfort? Couldn't they have just tried a bit harder to sail through the storm? Maybe this was the sailors' fault.

But, could this even be the fault of God himself? He was, after all, the one who called up the storm. Perhaps Jonah wasn't cut out for the job of prophet. Couldn't God have called on someone else? And even after Jonah refused, wasn't there another way for God to deliver him to Ninevah? Maybe this was God's fault.

So, who's to blame, here – Jonah, the sailors, or God? I'm no legal expert but my sense is that there's an attorney somewhere out there who could make the case against any one of these three. Perhaps that's why we're so quick to cast

blame – we know that if we find the correct articulation, if we just argue hard enough or even long enough, perhaps the world will look to us and think, “You know, you’re right – it really isn’t your fault after all.” We hate being the subject of blame, so we’ll do all sorts of psychological, emotional, and even theological gymnastics to wriggle out of our own shame, guilt, and sin – oftentimes simply by pointing our fingers at others.

Casting blame really is a zero-sum game, isn’t it? We only gain by forcing another to lose. So, I wonder what would happen if we responded differently. What if, instead of looking for those who are at fault, we looked for those who support, encourage, and save?

Let’s look to Jonah’s prayer that we read earlier to illuminate this concept. Imagine Jonah, wedged somewhere along the digestive system of an enormous fish – if he first points to blame, he can find himself in any of the three places we’ve already looked. “This is all my fault, I should have just

listened to God.” Or, “I can’t believe those sailors threw me overboard, we could have figured something out.” Or perhaps, “I can’t believe that God would do this to me, how could he abandon me like this?”

But what if Jonah, instead of looking for who to blame, looks for who might save? He certainly can’t do it himself. The sailors at this point are long gone. So, who’s left? Who will be the savior? Well, it’s God of course. The only one who could ever truly save. Let’s return to Jonah’s prayer for a moment. Verse 7, “When my life was ebbing away I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you.” Jonah knows that blame is pointless, here, and there’s no rescue ship on the way. He looks to God.

Verse 8, “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them.” My sense is that there’s some self-accountability happening, here. Jonah knows that he has clung to worthless idols. That he has placed his hopes in futile

efforts. He knows that he's the kind of purpose who has turned away from God's love.

And finally verse 9, "But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, "Salvation comes from the Lord." It's reminiscent of the old hymn - "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name." We have to know, like Jonah did, that salvation comes from the Lord. If we're going to try to look away from blame and look toward a savior, we're going to have to learn to look in the right place. That's why I love the line, "I dare not trust the sweetest frame" because there's a lot of sweetness out there that we think might save us.

Our finances can get pretty sweet when we think we can buy our way out of anything. Our intelligence gets pretty sweet when we think we can talk our way out of anything. Our self-righteousness gets pretty sweet when we think we can

blame everyone else to clear our own name. But what the communion table reminds us is what Jonah reminds us: Salvation comes from the Lord. My friends, we need to do a better job of looking not to cast blame. Looking not to find fault. Not arguing over who got us into this mess, but instead looking to who might get us out. As for me, I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Perhaps you'll join me.

Amen.



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