

Last week, we started looking at the story of Jonah. God instructed Jonah to go and prophesy to the city of Nineveh, to warn them God would destroy their city if they did not turn from their wicked ways. Jonah hated the Assyrian Empire, of which Nineveh was part. In 731 BC, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The last thing Jonah wanted was for the city of Nineveh to be saved from calamity. So, he boarded a ship going in the opposite direction.

Jonah ran from his God-given task. Jonah chose to live outside of God’s will, because it did not match his own desires. And what happened as a result? A storm arose. A storm arose and I want to suggest to you that when our lives are out of alignment with God’s will, when we take our lives in the opposite direction of where God wants us to go, that’s when we experience the storm.

In fact, in the midst of the fierce winds and raging sea, Jonah fell asleep. We might ask how could a person possibly sleep on board a ship being tossed about in a storm? Sleep is symbolic of depression. Depression often leads to too much or not enough sleep. Sleep can also be a kind of escape. It can be a response to tension and a mechanism for avoiding one’s situation.

Jonah decided to run in the opposite direction from God’s call. The result was both outer turmoil, symbolized by the storm, and inner turmoil, symbolized by the fact that he was asleep. After informing the ship’s crew that the storm might be the result of Jonah’s disobedience, they threw him overboard in hopes the storm would subside. That’s when Jonah was swallowed by a great fish or a whale, depending on your Bible translation.

Now, we might think of the whale as punishment. Jonah was running from his God-given task, as punishment, he’d be required to spend three days in the whale’s belly. Maybe God abandoned Jonah, allowing him to be swallowed up by a creature of the sea.

Twenty years ago, I attended a workshop for pastors led by the then senior minister at the Riverside Church in New York City, Rev. James Forbes. The topic was revitalization. How do pastors remain spiritually vital while dealing with all the pushes and pulls of church life.

He made the suggestion that congregations are whales. Congregations swallow pastors whole and just like it can stink inside a whale, life in the church can stink. Being in the belly of a congregation can be really unpleasant and uncomfortable, when there's conflict or complaints or when you're out at meetings every night of the week.

But Forbes helped me to see the story of Jonah in a new way. He suggested the whale symbolized God's provision. The whale saved Jonah and assisted him. This morning, I invite you to think of our church, our congregation as a whale. Sometimes the whale turns in one direction. Everybody lean left. Then, it turns and goes a different direction. Everybody lean right.

The congregation is a whale that swallows people whole and it's not just pastors. We've all been swallowed up. You know as well as I do, it's not always comfortable being inside the whale. It's unpleasant when the church makes a decision we don't agree with. It stinks when someone offends us. It's uncomfortable when the church asks for money in order to engage in its ministry.

However, according to Forbes, the whale was sent by God in order to provide Jonah 3 things: protection, reflection and direction. And I want to suggest to you the church provides those three things as well.

First, the whale provided Jonah protection. We might think of getting swallowed by a whale as the worst thing that could've happened, but it prevented Jonah from drowning. The whale saved his life and provided protection from the elements.

A congregation, at its best, provides protection. Recently, I received a phone call from a gentleman who had nowhere to go. He was being displaced from his dwelling and had no money for a hotel. We were able to provide that man shelter from the elements.

The church has a way of plucking people out of the storm-tossed seas of life, and providing refuge. In fact, this space in which we worship is most often called a sanctuary. A sanctuary is a place of refuge or safety.

Secondly, the whale provided Jonah time for reflection. He was in the belly of the whale three days and he began to pray. The second chapter of Jonah provides the words to his prayer. It begins: *Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried,*

*and you heard my voice.* I can't imagine there's a whole lot to do in the belly of a whale besides praying and reflecting on what went wrong in one's life to lead to that situation.

The congregation provides that same function. When we come into worship on Sunday morning, it's time away from the busyness of life, or from activities like video games or television. Bible study and social gatherings and youth group meetings provide time for reflection.

Recently, I was listening to physicist Brian Cox. He was explaining how, as far as we know, Earth is the only place in the universe where there is meaning. I never thought of it this way. The universe is so vast it boggles the mind, but the only place we know of, in which the universe can think about itself is on our little planet.

According to Brian Cox, if life becomes unsustainable on earth, as far as we know, meaning will disappear. Hearing him say that made me think about how important it is to take time to reflect and ponder. Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Like the whale did for Jonah, the church provides opportunity for reflection and prayer.

As it was with Jonah in the belly of the whale, the church gives us time and space to reflect. Am I going the right direction in my life? Am I living according to my values? How's it going with in my walk with Jesus Christ? Have I been running from God's purpose for me? Do I need to make some changes in how I think and how I behave? As we worship, we're in the belly of the whale together.

Thirdly, the whale gave Jonah direction. Jonah was running in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. That led to all kinds of distress for Jonah. After three days, the whale spit him up onto dry land. That meant Jonah had a second chance to take on his God-given task.

As I mentioned in last week's sermon, having three days in the belly of a whale for prayer and reflection can change a person. This time, he went to Nineveh and did what God instructed. As a congregation, we swallow people whole. We provide time and space for reflection. At its best, the church then delivers people changed. You and I are part of something that gets people to where they need to be.

When I was a teenager, the last thing I ever thought I would do was become a pastor. I experienced the call to ministry as a young adult, but I ran as long and as far as I could. Even when I went to seminary, I wasn't sure I could commit to working in a church. But I

went through a three-year ordination process in the church. That time of worshiping regularly, studying and reflecting changed me. Then, my denomination spit me out in central Maine to serve my first church.

By means of the whale, God provided Jonah protection, reflection, and direction. Today, First Parish Church is a whale. It's our task to protect people from the storm-tossed waters of life. It's our task to give people time to reflect and pray.

Lastly, it's our task to help people find the direction God wants them to go and the purpose God has for them. Because life doesn't get any better, any more meaningful, any more enjoyable and fulfilling than when we align ourselves with God's desire for us.

That's what makes the book of Jonah and the history of our church a whale of a story.