



# Giving Thanks Ahead of Schedule

*TEXT*  
*Jonah 2*

September 16, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**J**onah is in the belly of the fish and he prays. It's a prayer of thanksgiving.

There's something about being in the belly of the fish that brings everything into focus. When the crisis comes, we discover something of who we are or who we want to be, and sometimes, that's when we see God most clearly.

Captain Dimitri Kolesnikov was a crewman on the Russian submarine the Kursk. In 2000, this sub suffered an accidental explosion in which most of the 118 crewmen were killed instantly, but 23 survived "for a while." From the belly of the sub on the bottom of the Barents Sea, Kolesnikov wrote notes to his wife. "None of us can get to the surface," he wrote. The emergency lighting had gone out, leaving them in a chilling darkness; he continued, "I am writing blindly."<sup>1</sup>

Yes, in one sense. But in another sense, he saw things very clearly. And he wasn't a crewman on a sub. He was defined by who he loved and who loved him. And the only thing that mattered was to connect with them. "I hope they find this note, so that you can know one more time, that I loved you to the end."

The word of God came to Jonah. When the word of God comes to us, it comes not simply as information or even enlightenment; it comes as a calling word. But not just calling. It first comes as a claiming word.

It's like baptism. In baptism, we celebrate something. We celebrate that we belong to God. We are claimed by God. We Presbyterians baptize babies and young children because we want to make this point clearly. You don't belong to God because you are smart or faithful, because you are talented or good. You belong to God not because of what is in your heart, but because of the love that lives in God's heart.

The word of God came to Jonah not because of what was in Jonah's heart, but because of the love in God's heart. Jonah knew that to be true. It's a claiming word.

Jonah ran from this word. He ran down to Joppa. Then down to the ship. Then down in the hold of the ship. Then down into the sea where a great fish that dines on krill and disobedient prophets swallowed him up.

And from the belly of this fish, he prays. And this prayer,

it's a prayer of thanksgiving. Does that surprise you? He doesn't pray a prayer of lament — or a prayer of complaint. He is not praying, "Why me?" Here he is in the belly of a fish, surrounded by whatever else you might find in the belly of a fish, and he gives thanks. What in the world is he thankful for?

Now I don't know who wrote this story, but I tell you had I written Jonah, I think I would have Jonah give thanks later. Gratitude comes more naturally not when we are at the bottom, but when things are going well.

One of my favorite places in the world is Quetico, Canada. It is a national park, just across the border from Minnesota. It's miles and miles of lakes, no cottages and no motor boats — just canoes and campsites. I returned there this summer, and this time I went with my son. He's 24 now. When we got to the portages, he got to carry the canoe. It was just the two of us camping for five days and four nights. We didn't see anyone else.

It was a great trip. We ate fish that we caught an hour before. We watched bald eagles feed. We built campfires and talked late into the night. I'll

never forget our last night there. We sat by the fire and could see Mars as close as it can be to us. But we could also see Saturn and Jupiter and Venus, all hanging low in the sky. As we talked, I realized, I will always be that man's father. But I'm not really his parent anymore. I don't know if that makes sense to you, but that's what it feels like. And it feels good, and the gratitude was overwhelming.

When life is good, gratitude is reasonable — sometimes inescapable.

But life is not good for Jonah. He prays, believing his life is over. He says he prays from the belly of Sheol. Sheol is the place of the dead. It's not hell, not punishment, just dead. And from the belly of Sheol he prays with a voice of thanksgiving. It seems like thanksgiving ahead of schedule. Nothing good has happened yet, except this. As strange as it is, I think he is grateful because the word of God came to him. I think this is the moment where Jonah understands God most clearly. Because Jonah knows even in the belly of Sheol, he is loved by God. He has been claimed by God.

This is the point: We are all Jonah. You are going to find yourself in the belly of the fish sometime. You will. When the crisis comes, you don't want to waste a crisis — because there's something about crisis that can bring everything into focus. Oh, I know it's not automatic, but it can happen. And when it does, we discover

something of who we are, of who we want to be. And sometimes, that is when we see God most clearly.

If I understand the text, Jonah is thankful, for this unfaithful prophet who has rejected God's calling still belongs to God. There is nothing Jonah can do to change that. "I with a voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you," he says.

I read Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible. Dr. Trible is a wonderful reader of texts, and she's not buying this grateful Jonah. She rightly points out that in Chapter 1, he wants nothing to do with God. And as soon as he is spewed from the fish, he goes to Nineveh. But you will not find a more passionless prophet, and he continues to complain to the very end. She says he's not really grateful; this prayer is what she calls "counterfeit piety."<sup>2</sup>

Maybe. But I think Dr. Trible may be a bit too harsh on Jonah. I think this little short story teaches us something about gratitude. Gratitude can be something we embrace because the circumstances of our lives are all good. But there is a deeper gratitude.

Listen to this. There is a deeper gratitude that comes not because the circumstances of our lives are all positive. There is a gratitude that is a spiritual practice; a choice of gratitude because no matter the circumstances, I am not alone.

Martin Toler, Jr., was a miner in West Virginia. He was in the Sago mine when there was an explosion, trapping him

and many others in the belly of the mine. He did what we do. He wrote to his wife. "Tell all I will see them on the other side. It wasn't bad. I just went to sleep. I love you."<sup>3</sup>

What am I saying? I think in crisis we remember not only who we are and who we want to be, but to whom we belong.

And what Jonah knows in his marrow is that he belongs to a God who is surprisingly gracious. And even as he has spent his life running from this God, refusing to be obedient to this God, he is grateful that God remains gracious.

*For with a voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice for you.*

Years ago, I traveled with folks from the church in Jacksonville that I served. We took a trip to Louisville, Kentucky. A year before, flood waters had rushed through various communities as a storm, much like folks in the Carolinas are discovering this weekend. Flood waters had rushed through and damaged or destroyed property.

Carol and I and a couple vanloads of youth and other adults went to help. I spent the week working on Sophie's house. We were ten months after the flood, but when we walked into her modest home, if you leaned down you could see from one end to the other. Another group had come through and torn out all the wet sheetrock, but none of it had been replaced. So, all week we put up sheetrock in Sophie's house.

We didn't finish. When it came time to leave, most of her

furniture was still pushed to the center of the rooms. She didn't know when or if another group would come to help. We stood in her front yard and held hands and prayed. And Sophie gave thanks to God. She said, "Lord, you have been so gracious to me. You have not forgotten me. Great is thy faithfulness, O God, morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand has provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me."

I was stunned. The crisis did not define her faith, her faith defined the crisis.

Here's what I want you to reflect on this week. Your life will be a mix of plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health, good and bad. It will. The balance may be strong in good things, but it will be a mix.

But the grounding of your life was proclaimed at your baptism. You belong to God and nothing will change that. The word of God is a claiming word. When you know that to be true, even from the bottom, gratitude can flow.

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<sup>1</sup>Roger Rosenblatt, "I Am Writing Blindly," *Time* (Nov. 6, 2000)

<sup>2</sup>Phyllis Tribble, *The Book of Jonah, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII*, (1996), p. 506

<sup>3</sup>Reported in various newspapers at the time. Toler was one of 12 miners trapped in the mines.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.