Sermon Series: The Reluctant Prophet
Sermon Title: The God of Second Chances

Text: Jonah 1:17-2:10 -- And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Introduction: In the late winter of 1891, the whale-ship ***Star of the East*** was in the vicinity of **the Falkland Islands** (about 300 miles off the tip of South America) when it came within sight of a whale. Two boats were dispatched with harpoons to snare and kill the beast, but the lashing of its tail capsized one of the launches, spilling the crew into the sea. **All were accounted for except for a single sailor, *James Bartley***. Ultimately, the whale was killed and the carcass drawn alongside the vessel to begin the process of salvaging valuable resources. By the next day, good progress had been made in removing the layers of blubber from the beast, so a tackle was attached to its stomach to hoist it on deck. Sailors were startled by spasmodic life within the belly of the whale, and upon further inspection, the missing sailor was found. **Bartley was quite mad for two weeks, but upon recovering his senses he recounted what little he could recall of being dragged under the water**. Struggling for his life, he had been drawn into darkness within which he felt a terrible and oppressive heat. He found slimy walls that gave slightly to his touch, but could find no exit. When his situation finally dawned on him, Bartley lost his senses completely and lapsed into a catatonic state. During his time inside the whale, the gastric juices affected his exposed skin. **His face, neck and hands were bleached a deathly white with a texture like parchment, a condition from which the skin never recovered**. Bartley believed that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, as breathing was not a problem.

Though this story was confirmed by **Sir Francis Fox and two French scientists**, others have disputed Bartley's claim. This shouldn't surprise us. Many skeptics have argued the impossibility of the story of Jonah as well! I've often wondered why some Bible scholars find this so hard to accept. Even some conservative scholars argue that it is nothing more than a parable meant to make a point, rather than provide us with an accurate account of a historical event. **Why is it that people can believe the Bible when it speaks of the incarnation of the Son of God, His miracles, and His resurrection from the dead, but they cannot believe that God could cause a large fish to swallow a reluctant prophet and spit him back out again alive three days later?** Jesus believed it and used this incident with Jonah as a sign to explain the events surrounding His death, burial, and resurrection (**See Matthew 12:39-41**).

There is a common parallel between these two events that I would like us to consider this morning. **Just as Christ brought salvation to us by going to the belly of the earth and rising again in three days, having conquered death and brought life to those who believe, so Jonah went down in the belly of a fish and was raised to new life three days later**. The similarities between the two stories are no accident! Don't miss the message that God has for us in this passage: SALVATION IS AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE. **What we learn from Jonah is that it is only a prayer away!** Let's take a few moments and break down the prayer of Jonah so that we can have a better understanding of how salvation comes to us.

The REASON for Jonah's prayer (**Jonah 1:17-2:2 -- And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice**). Jonah uses the word "***distress***" to describe his emotional state inside the whale. **The verb form of the word actually is used to refer to the pain that a woman experiences while giving birth** (**Jeremiah 49:22 -- Behold, one shall mount up and fly swiftly like an eagle and spread his wings against Bozrah, and the heart of the warriors of Edom shall be in that day like the heart of a woman in her birth pains/DISTRESS**). The reluctant prophet was obviously going through a pretty difficult time, and **it was his pain that drove Jonah to his knees**.

Now that makes a lot of sense. Where else was he going to turn but to God for deliverance from his predicament? I don't know if this is what you have seen, but it has been my observation that **people often come to Christ when their lives are coming apart**. God seems to use adversity to draw us to Himself (**Job 36:15-16 – Elihu speaking to Job -- He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity. He also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no cramping, and what was set on your table was full of fatness**). I cannot tell you how many opportunities I have had to share the Gospel (the foundation for our hope) with those who are suffering intense personal pain. **It is natural that when people go through adversity, they look for someone or something that can bring relief. Consider how many people came to Jesus in but two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew for this very reason. *Some were inflicted with disease and physical infirmity*** (**Matthew 8:1-2 -- When (Jesus) came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean"; 8:5-6 -- When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly"; 9:1-2 -- And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed; 9:27 -- And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, "Have mercy on us, Son of David"**). ***Others who were in danger from nature*** (**Matthew 8:23-25 -- And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing"**). ***Some were the victims of spiritual conflict*** (**Matthew 8:28 -- When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way**). ***And still others who faced the stinging pain of the death of a loved one*** (**Matthew 9:18 -- While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live"**). **There's nothing quite so effective as distress and adversity to cause us to look to heaven!** It worked for Jonah. He had been running away from God's divine purpose for his life, but as a result of being swallowed by a great fish, things were changing.

The TIMING of Jonah's prayer (**Jonah 2:3 -- For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me; 2:5-6 -- The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head 6 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God**). **Jonah did not pray when the sailors did, as the sea was raging around them** (**See Jonah 1:4-5**). He only called out to God **(1)** ***AFTER*** *he was cast into the water*, **(2)** ***AFTER*** *the waves and breakers swept over him*, **(3)** ***AFTER*** *he found himself at the bottom of the sea wrapped in seaweed*, and even **(4)** ***AFTER*** *he was swallowed by a great fish and it looked as if all was lost*. **When it became apparent that there was nowhere else to turn, Jonah prayed**. Now, before we think too critically of him, it would be wise to recognize that Jonah is not that different from many of us. **Just like the rebellious prophet, many of us will**

not call upon God until we have exhausted all other possibilities for deliverance and completely abandoned all hope of rescue.

I'm reminded of a story that James David Ford, chaplain of the U. S. House of Representatives since 1979, shared: **In the spring of '76, I sailed the Atlantic Ocean with a couple of friends. In a 31-foot vessel, we sailed from Plymouth, England to New York, 5,992 miles**. **My father advised me,** "**Don't go. You have five children. Wait till they're grown**." During the trip, we hit a real hurricane with some of the waves **35 feet high**. Frankly, I was really scared. As the hurricane went into its third day, I thought about my father's words and wondered if I'd ever see my children again. The skies were black and the clouds were hurrying by. **I wanted to pray for God to stop the storm, but I felt guilty because I'd gotten into this of my own free will. I didn't have to go across the ocean**. Finally, I prayed 7 words: ***O God, I have had enough. Amen***." Within half an hour of that simple prayer, the sky in the west lifted like a screen in a theater and the sky was blue once again. **It seemed that Jonah had had enough, too! There was simply no lower depth to which he could sink. With nowhere else to turn, he cried out to God**. (**Review: The REASON for Jonah's prayer – extremely intense distress; The TIMING of Jonah's prayer – When he got to the bottom of his rope**.)

The COMPOSITION of Jonah's prayer (**Jonah 2:4-7 -- Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple**). When we've been running from God and headlong into sin, we can always pray to Him, but we must do so with a broken and repentant heart. Jonah prayed, "**I am driven away from Your sight**." **Having attempted earlier to flee to Tarshish from God's presence, he now finds himself destined for Sheol (i.e., the place of death), where he will be permanently isolated from God**. **Jonah is fully aware that he has earned his fate** (**Romans 6:23 – For the wages of sin is death**) **and there is nothing he can do about it**.

Before anyone can experience salvation, he must be convinced that his rebellion before a Holy God has earned him only death, judgment and separation. **Listen to how the writer of Hebrews put it in Hebrews 10:26-31 -- For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God**. **But this is only half of how salvation comes to us! Just like Jonah, anyone seeking salvation must also acknowledge that apart from a gracious work of God on his behalf, he is doomed**. And so it was with the prophet. Jonah not only came under conviction of his sin, but he then repented of it and looked to God for his salvation. Consider his words: "**I will look again toward Your holy temple." "I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to You, to Your holy temple**." **These are words of repentance and faith, of turning from a life of independence and self-will to a life of dependence and submission**.

I have found that most people at one time or another suffer sorrow over their sin. But the Bible teaches that sorrow by itself is not enough. Godly sorrow, we are told, leads to repentance and salvation (**2 Corinthians 7:10 -- For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death**). **Suppose that you shared your faith with someone. As you did, you were faithful to carefully explain the wages of sin and the free gift of God in Christ**. The person agreed with everything you said. At the end of your presentation, however, the individual to whom you were speaking looked at you and

said, "***If this means that things are going to have to change in my life, then I'm not sure Christianity is for me. Don't get me wrong, I want to go to heaven when I die, but I like my life just the way it is***." How would you respond? I think most of us would say, "**I think you understand the implications of becoming a follower of Christ. Now it is up to you to decide if living WITH the Lord is better than dying WITHOUT Him**." Jonah made the right decision and it made all the difference.

The OUTCOME of Jonah's prayer (Jonah 2:6-10 -- I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet <u>you brought up my life from the pit</u>, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land). **What happens when we call on God with a broken, repentant and believing heart? We are not disappointed**. **Salvation came to Jonah just as it does to all who earnestly call upon God** (**Psalm 145:18 -- The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth**). "**You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God**," he said. "**Salvation belongs to the Lord**." **Jonah ends his prayer by contrasting those who cling to worthless idols** (**Perhaps referring to the sailors who had prayed at first to their gods. Remember that Jonah would not have known that they had turned to faith in Yahweh since they did so after he had been thrown overboard**) **and those who turn to the God of heaven who made the sea and the land**. The former forfeit grace (favor), while the latter are filled with thanksgiving and the desire to obey.

<u>What have we said today</u>: **The REASON for Jonah's prayer was his condition of extreme distress; The TIMING of Jonah's prayer – When he bottomed out**; **The COMPOSITION of Jonah's prayer – I am driven away from your sight – I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you; The OUTCOME of Jonah's prayer – You brought up my life from the pit – What I have vowed I will pay – Salvation belongs to the Lord!**

As we conclude, think about your life for a moment. **Have you been running from God? Do you need to repent of your sin and return to Him today? Have you been living a life characterized by rebellion and self-will? Are you ready to renounce your ability to deliver yourself and call out to God? There is no better time to do so than this very moment**.

Conclusion: Some years ago, o*ne of the largest department stores in our nation took on a commercial venture that proved to be disastrously unsuccessful. It was a doll in the form of the baby Jesus*. It was advertised as being **unbreakable, washable and cuddly**. It was packaged in straw with a satin crib and plastic surroundings, and appropriate biblical texts were added here and there to make the scene complete. ***<u>It did not sell</u>***. The manager of one of the stores in the department chain panicked. He carried out a last-ditch promotion to get rid of those dolls. He brandished a huge sign outside his store that read: ***<u>Jesus Christ--Marked down 50%--Get Him while you can!</u>*** **Maybe this isn't a very good way to sell baby Jesus dolls, but it is a pretty good way to help people grasp the importance of looking to Him for salvation now**. GET HIM WHILE YOU CAN. None of us knows what the future holds. Perhaps, like Jonah, we'll find ourselves facing some kind of catastrophe in the near future, but unlike him, we'll fail to repent and call out in faith for salvation. The best time to decide for Christ is NOW. **He is only a prayer away.**