

**“Second Chances”**  
**Jonah 2:1-10**  
**November 15, 2020**

*The story of Jonah and the Whale is one of the best-known tales in the Hebrew Bible. It tells what happened when Jonah tried to run away from God and how he got a second chance. Hear what the Spirit is saying to us today in Jonah, Chapter 2, verses 1-10:*

Then Jonah prayed to his God from the belly of the fish.

He prayed:

“In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to GOD.  
He answered me.  
From the belly of the grave I cried, ‘Help!’  
You heard my cry.  
You threw me into ocean’s depths,  
into a watery grave,  
With ocean waves, ocean breakers  
crashing over me.  
I said, ‘I’ve been thrown away,  
thrown out, out of your sight.  
I’ll never again lay eyes

The Ocean gripped me by the throat.  
The ancient Deep grabbed me and held tight.  
My head was all tangled in sea weed  
at the bottom of the sea where the mountains take root.  
I was as far down as a body can go,  
and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever—

Yet you pulled me up from that grave alive,  
O GOD, my God!  
When my life was slipping away,  
I remembered GOD,  
And my prayer got through to you,  
made it all the way to your Holy Temple.

Those who worship hollow gods, god-imposters  
walk away from their only true love.  
But I’m worshiping you, GOD, true GOD  
calling out in thanksgiving!  
And I’ll do what I promised I’d do!  
Salvation belongs to GOD!”  
Then GOD spoke to the whale, and it spit up Jonah on the seashore.

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

What a *lovely* image: Jonah getting barfed up onto the shore by a whale of a fish after the man has stewed in its belly for 3 days and 3 nights. Ick! But, as my rabbi friend would say, given the alternative...

Why did this happen to Jonah, you might ask? Let me tell you the story and I think you will be able to figure out its moral.

Jonah was chosen by God to be a prophet to the ancient city of Nineveh, about 600 years before Jesus. But Jonah said no to God, booking it out of there in the opposite direction. At the port of Joppa, he paid to board a boat to Tarshish, as far away from God as he could get.

“God sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering.” The ship was about to break into pieces and the sailors were terrified. They had all prayed to their gods, but the storm just kept getting worse. Jonah was napping in the hold of the ship, oblivious to the peril. The ship’s captain shook him awake, begging Jonah to pray for deliverance.

The men demanded to know who Jonah’s god was that had visited this disaster on them. He confessed that he was a Hebrew and that his God was the God who made sea and land. He further confessed that he was running away from God and that God had caused the sea to rise up against him.

The sailors were furious and they shouted at him, “How are we going to weather the storm? This is all your fault!” Then, Jonah suggested they throw him into the sea. “Get rid of me,” he offered, “and you’ll get rid of the storm.” The sailors saw no alternative.

Sure enough, in went Jonah into the raging sea and immediately the waves were quieted. Impressed by the this turn of events, they “worshipped God, offered a sacrifice, and made vows.” They had been given a second chance to give their lives to Jonah’s God and they did not waste it. Jonah was immediately swallowed up by a whale-like fish, sent by God to rescue and confine him.

In total darkness from the belly of the whale, Jonah had a change of heart—wouldn’t you? He prayed and prayed to God, and God took mercy on the foolish would-be prophet. As frequently happens in the Bible, God’s choice for a mouthpiece is a reluctant hero. It sometimes takes some pretty strong convincing to get chosen folks off their couch and into the public ministry life!

Jonah got a second chance. And he did not waste it. He became the prophet to Nineveh that God intended him to be.

Coach Norman Dale got a second chance, too. In the film, “Hoosiers,” Dale—played by the incomparable Gene Hackman, comes to a small, inconsequential high school in Indiana to coach its tiny, mediocre basketball team. The men of the town think they should help him coach, but he is not needing or wanting their offered advice.

There is one really good basketball player in the high school, but he has quit the team and has no interest in playing any more. He doesn’t speak much in the movie. He’s withdrawn and not interested in town politics.

It doesn’t take long for the people of Hickory to turn against Coach Dale. When the storm comes and the waves get tall, they, like the sailors on the ship to Tarshish, look around for someone to blame. And like Jonah, Norman Dale has been thrown into the sea. Hickory, Indiana is the belly of the whale.

Coach Dale used to coach at the college level, but in anger one day he hit a player and rightly so, he was immediately dismissed. After 10 years of service as a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, he was offered the high school coaching job. He was given a second chance.

Throughout his story, he also gives others their second chance. He passes on the kindness shown to him. He lets a player back on the team after the student disrespects him. He offers a former town basketball star-turned-drunk a chance as assistant coach. He keeps the door open for Jimmy, the reticent basketball star, until Jimmy has reason to rejoin the team and trust his new coach. And Norm offers himself and another teacher, a woman, a second chance at love. He knows the gift of redemption that he has been given. Part of his healing comes with how he helps heal others.

There is not a person alive who has not been given second chances, endless second chances to say “Yes” to the God of our Fathers and Mothers. God asks us to say Yes to the call, and not to run the other way. And the Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that, “nothing can ever separate us from the love of God” (Romans 8:38).

For us to recognize and respect our second chances is an important spiritual act of contrition. Who else in your life needs a second chance? Is there someone who wronged you, as the Lord’s Prayer mentions, and in your forgiving them you also shall be forgiven?

We may not be able to travel to the big family Thanksgiving this year or welcome family or friends to our dinner table. Maybe that breaks your heart and maybe it’s a good thing. This has been a tough year for families and politics, for families and separations. Governor Polis has asked us not to mix more than two

households and has suggested it would be a private act in the interest of public safety to spend Thanksgiving only with our live-in family.

That's tough and for some of you, it's far worse. You may be spending the day all by yourself. Let's all make a plan right now to call three people from the church on Thanksgiving morning, preferably three you don't know very well. Call, not email, call not text. Call. It's a second chance to build community—not face-to-face, but nevertheless, heart-to-heart and ear-to-ear. It's God calling you to Nineveh, and running away to Tarshish is not what pleases God.

After your pie or between football games, you might offer a second chance to someone who needs it. I'll leave it to you to define what that means. But I venture that there is someone who needs you to offer them the love and redemption that God has freely given you.

Eugene Peterson writes this about the story of Jonah:

Stories are the most prominent biblical way of helping us see ourselves in 'the God story,' which always gets around to the story of God making us and saving us. Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into becoming participants in what is being said. We may start out as spectators or critics, but if the story is good (and the biblical story [of Jonah] is very good!), we find ourselves no longer just listening to but inhabiting the story.

One reason that the Jonah story is so enduringly important for nurturing the life of faith in us is that Jonah is not a hero too high and mighty for us to identify with—he doesn't do anything great. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire, we find Jonah as a companion in our ineptness...The whole time, God is working within and around Jonah's very ineptness and accomplishing his purposes in him. Most of us need a biblical friend or two like Jonah."

One of the most endearing of the stories within the story of *Hoosiers* is that of “Shooter,” the former basketball star of the Hickory team who has lost his wife and son to the bottle. Even as Coach Dale is fighting for his own job, he offers a second chance to Shooter to be a coach for the team. Shooter manages to clean himself up some, but he cannot sustain his sobriety on sheer willpower. The inevitable setback happens to the extreme embarrassment of his son, who plays on the team.

But the effort put forth by Coach Dale to redeem him does not go unnoticed—not by the acting school principal and not by Jimmy Chitwood, the basketball phenom who offers to come back to the team but only if “Coach is allowed to stay on.”

Later on, when Shooter is in the hospital getting help for his alcoholism, his son is able to offer his father a second chance. The healing that happens for both of them is obvious when Everett tells his father, “I love you.”

It would take a long time to speak of all the second chances in the story of *Hoosiers*. Maybe it would take a long time to speak of all the second chances any of us have been given. When Jonah gives himself up to save the innocent sailors on the boat to Tarshish, he is giving them second chances and when God causes the whale to spit him out, he, too, is given a second chance. When Micah speaks his famous lines, “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God,” he is speaking of giving and accepting second chances. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, he is talking about giving and receiving second chances. Life lived in the warm sunrays of God’s love is all about second chances. We are to freely give them and we will receive them over and over- God’s love never runs dry.

As Shooter tells the boys at the end of a big game he coaches, “Run that picket fence men, and don’t let the paint dry.”

Take the second chances when they are given to you, but give more of them than you receive. You’ll have nothing to regret in life if you do, and everything to gain.

It wasn’t God’s wish that Jonah ended up tossed into the ocean, but it was in God’s plan to redeem him and give him a second chance. After all, that’s what God does. And that’s what God asks us to do in return.

*May It Be So.*