

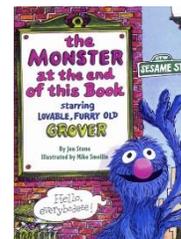
Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Jonah 2 on July 30, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb

Series: Prayer Is Powerful
Today's Focus: Out of the Depths

“There’s a Monster at the End of This Sermon!”

1. _____ the Sword
2. _____ in the Spirit

Who remembers the Sesame Street character, Grover? Blue, fuzzy guy, kinda loveable. Not a very scary monster at all in other words, right? That’s what made this book {pic} from my childhood so memorable. Anyone remember it... “The monster at the end of this book”? Well today my sermon theme is “There’s a Monster at the End of This Sermon!”



So... *Whatever you do...absolutely, positively, don't remember this Bible passage: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46)* In fact let’s just read it out loud together and any time this verse pops up today we’re just going to read it out loud because we *don't* want to remember it, ok? 😊

Our lesson today about prayer comes from the book of Jonah in the Old Testament of the Bible. And Jonah’s story is actually something I’m reminded of every morning. You see, every morning for the last 12 years I’ve gotten up with this quilt hanging right above my bed on the wall {show pic}.



There on the right-hand side of the quilt is the city of Nineveh—that capital city of Assyria, a world super power at the time, to which Jonah was called to preach. And as you can see they needed to hear the message God sent Jonah to preach—because their lives had gotten all sideways with sin! They were in deep spiritual darkness over there in Nineveh—known for their arrogance, their cruelty, and their violence. It was survival of the meanest. Their motto was, “If you want it, go get it. And if it feels good, just do it.”

Sounds a bit like our country, doesn’t it? My oldest daughter when she was little would climb up on our bed, look at this quilt, point at Nineveh and say, “Sad! Daddy, sad!” And it *was* sad for the people of Nineveh. Just like for a lot of people in our world today who are in pursuit of whatever they think will make them happy no matter what they have to do to get it. And the world out there is as cruel as ever, isn’t it? This past week in our Milwaukee community a 6 year-old boy was shot and killed in his grandma’s yard. A woman was carjacked just up the road on 27th St and had her face beaten into a pulp. And unless you set boundaries for yourself, your smartphone will bombard you with a relentless stream of instant updates on tragedies and atrocities all around this hurting globe. It’s hard some days just to get out of bad without feeling engulfed by the darkness or blanketed by despair, isn’t it?

Whatever you do...absolutely, positively, don't remember this Bible passage: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46)

But God had a job for Jonah. And now try and put yourself in his shoes. God said, "Jonah, go tell your worst enemies that I want to have a relationship with them too." Can you imagine that? How would you feel if you woke up tomorrow and that was the assignment God gave you? Would you think, "I just wanna get away and go to Southwest Airlines and book the first flight out of here?" Because that was Jonah's reaction. "No way, God! Don't you understand? They're bad people doing bad things!" And it's like God was saying, "I know! Their lives are sideways with sin. There's darkness in their hearts. But I want to turn them around. I want to give them a new start."



So what did Jonah do? He bought a ticket for a boat ride to Tarshish (everybody say Tarshish!). Tarshish was in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh about as far as one could go in the known world at that time. Except if you look again at the picture of the quilt...can you see where Jonah is {pic}? He's no longer on board that boat, is he? Oh it's nice and sunny and happy up there for the people left on that boat as they're

praising and thanking God for his deliverance. That's because God caused a raging storm to stop when they threw Jonah overboard into the sea.

Whatever you do...absolutely, positively, don't remember this Bible passage: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." (Psalm 46)



But of course then there's Jonah, deep down in the sea. He's all alone and sinking down where he would've surely drowned had God not appointed a large sea creature to swallow him up as unlikely as that might sound. But we need to remember that God specializes in doing the unlikely. It's only a small thing for the Almighty God to appoint a large fish for a special mission. (At least the fish doesn't decide to disobey God

like Jonah!) So there's our friend Jonah now, in that dark, stinking belly of the great fish, sinking down into the depths of the sea. And he's just like the people of Nineveh—all sideways with sin because of his own self-righteous pride and stubborn resistance to doing the will of God.

You ever been there? In the darkness of your own pride or prejudice—resting on what you thought are your most religious looking qualities compared to others? Or maybe comforting yourself with the thought, "At least I'm not as bad as that guy." I have.

Or have you ever been there...feeling desperate or like you're drowning? Whether drowning in fear, drowning in failure, drowning in debt, drowning in sorrow, drowning in guilt, drowning in shame, drowning in criticism, or drowning in weakness? But what if, friends, sometimes this is right where God would have us? What if God loves us so much that in order to do his best work in our hearts he allows us into that place in the depths where we have nowhere to turn for help but to him? What if suffering, even that caused by our own making, can become a tool in the hands of our gracious God to save us from our own sinful pride and self-reliance?

Whatever you do...absolutely, positively, don't remember this Bible passage: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." (Psalm 46)

Think about Jonah thrown overboard, drowning in the sea, in the belly of the great fish. He has no cell phone reception here to use the Bible app and find a comforting verse. He cannot get away to do anything to help himself. There is nothing he can do in his weakness except to cry out to God with a prayer that comes deep from within his heart. And so he prays this beautiful prayer expressing his confidence in God's power to save him...

¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. ² He said:

**"In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.**

**From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.**

**³ You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.**

**⁴ I said, 'I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.'**

**⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.**

**⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you, LORD my God,
brought my life up from the pit.**

**⁷ "When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.**

**⁸ "Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God's love for them.**

**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.'"**

¹⁰ And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

In other words, the Almighty, all-knowing, every gracious God was answering Jonah's plea and providing for his rescue before, during, and after Jonah prayed. Prayer is powerful! And think about it...when Jonah was thrown overboard into the sea his first thought at getting swallowed by the fish might have been, "Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse!" But once on dry ground he could look back and actually see how God sending the fish was a blessing in disguise.

God had to personally teach me this lesson too. About ten years ago right when we were gearing up for Victory of the Lamb's grand opening service, my daughter Sophia was born. And everything leading up to that was going great. I was feeling confident about *my* church. I was feeling good about *my* family. Everything was going right in *my* life. And that's when the nurse in the delivery room said just before Sophia was going to be born, "Dr., Something's wrong. The baby's head is over here." And the next thing I knew is my wife Sarah was being raced out of the delivery room with the IV pole dragging behind her on the ground. Her uterus had ruptured in labor. They then locked the door behind her and I was left there all alone in the delivery room. All I could hear were people running up and down the hallway and shouting. What does one do in the situation like that? One moment everything was good. The next it seemed like the world was going to end.

You know what I did? The only thing I could do. I cried out to God. When I was sinking down, drowning with desperation, my whole world getting rocked...when words failed me...you know what came to mind? A prayer deep within my heart. Scripture I had memorized over a lifetime. So over and over again I cried out, "***God is my refuge and strength, an ever-present trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth give way and mountains fall into the heart of the sea.***" And when I couldn't do anything else I recited the words, "***Be still, and know that I am God***" (Psalm 46:1-2,10) and in so doing it was as if I could hear Jesus say, "Be still, Ben, and I know that I am God your Savior. I am with you. I am mighty to save."

And I'll never forget when the doctor finally opened the door. She said, "The good news is...your wife is alive. And you have a baby girl and she's alive...for now." Well friends, to make a long story short, our daughter Sophia, who is 10 years old now, went home from the NICU after a week. And after seeing a neurologist for the first 9 months of her life, he finally said, "You don't have to bring her to see me anymore. She's perfectly fine. I'm amazed." So I asked him, "Well Doc, do you believe in God." And he leaned back in his chair and thought about it a while and said, "Something like this makes me rethink what I've always thought because there's no other way to explain it."

Now why am I telling this personal story? Well today it's because I want to help you overcome the monster at the end of this sermon! You ready to find out what that monster is? It's memorization. Memory *work*, as it was called in my day. Some of you know what I'm talking about because you were forced to do it in school or confirmation class. I'm talking about the process of putting into your long-term memory the very words and promises of God. Memorizing Bible passages and important truths. For some of you memorizing seems like a monster, doesn't it? You didn't like memory work as a child. You found it difficult or tedious. Or for some of you you're thinking, "Memorize stuff? We don't do that anymore in education. We have Google and Siri and Alexa. We don't need to memorize things anymore because the internet will tell us." But what about when you're in the depths—I'm talking about that place where you feel like you're drowning and your mind is swimming or you're so overwhelmed you can hardly breathe and you don't know what to do?

I don't know if you noticed this or not but Jonah's whole prayer was simply Bible verses strung together, verses he knew by heart so that in the dark, stinking belly of the fish where he had no Bible app...yet he had a treasury of God's promises in his heart! Much like I had Psalm 46 in mine when my daughter was born.

Whatever you do...absolutely, positively, DO remember this Bible passage: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46)

So I want to just get real practical with you today as we wrap up. Memorizing Scripture might seem like a monster. But it's not at all really. It's a monster perhaps only the same way Grover is...ultimately a loveable one! You see memorizing Scripture is a practical way to take the sword of the Spirit to be able to wield it against all the actual monsters of our fears and the accusations of Satan himself. Do you recall what we heard earlier from Ephesians 6? ¹⁷ **Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.** ¹⁸ **And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.**

Take the sword. What is the sword? It's God's Word! It's those Spirit inspired words of the Bible which assure us that just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, so also Jesus Christ was only in the grave for three days before he burst forth alive just as he said (cf. Mt 12:39-40). And because he lives, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (cf. Ro 8:1). In him we have redemption through his blood—the forgiveness of sins (cf. Eph 1:7). In him we know that all things work together for our eternal good (cf. Ro 8:28). Salvation comes from the LORD (cf. Jonah 2:9)!

So when you memorize Scripture like Psalm 46, you sheathe the sword of the Spirit in your heart so that you can also wield it in prayer. Pray in the Spirit. What does it mean to pray in the Spirit? I believe it means to take the words and promises of God that are sheathed in your heart and pray them back to him. That's what Jonah did when was sinking down and on the verge of despair.

How can you learn to pray like this? Here are two practical tips. First, you remember what you repeat. Find a memory verse like Psalm 46 to write out on a couple sticky notes that you put in different places that you will see every day...your bathroom mirror, your car's dashboard, your refrigerator door, etc. Whenever you see it, say it out loud until you can do it without looking. Then turn it into a little prayer. You're taking up the sword of the Spirit!

And here's one more. I learned this one actually from Tim Tebow's mom—Pam Tebow. I heard her describe how she would sing Bible verses to her kids. She'd just make up a short, one verse little song. And you know what happened? Those little songs got embedded into her kids' hearts! This had such an impact on me that I immediately went home and started turning Bible verses into little musical phrases for my own family. For example, Psalm 121:7 has become our family's go-to prayer every time we get into the van to go somewhere. I'll even sing it to myself when I'm alone. It goes like this, “*Lord, watch over our coming and going both now and forevermore.*” And I know my Lord will! I have a feeling if I ever find myself in hospice one day, this very same little prayer will be my lifeline. So dear friends, memorization...it's really not so scary. It's actually quite loveable! And it's a way to wield the sword of the Spirit against all the other things in life that can seem scary. So take up the sword. Pray in the Spirit. Amen!