

**January 7, 2018 – Journey Worship**

**TEXT: Jonah 1:1–10**

**TITLE: Blessings in the Storm**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

*“O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*”

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”*

In the first few verses of Psalm 139 the author comes to terms with the fact that God’s presence and God’s spirit is unescapable, is doesn’t matter where, how or what we attempt to do to run from the presence of God, God is there.

The Psalmist’s words are comforting as we enter into 2018, putting a distance between ourselves and 2017, a year that was incomprehensible in so many ways and in spite of the daily bombardment of political, societal, economic, racial and environmental disasters, we have hope that 2018 will be a better year for all of God’s people.

That brings us to today’s passage, the story of Jonah, the reluctant, recalcitrant and unfaithful prophet. We know the story of Jonah, who was swallowed up by the big fish and after three days of darkness in the belly of the fish, he prayed to God, and was spit out on dry land. Jonah is a cautionary parable for everyone who confesses a hope and trust in God and a willingness to go wherever the Lord might send or command us to do. And yet, most of us are very Jonah-like in our responses to God. We may not run in the opposite direction of where we are commissioned to go, but we very often take the circuitous route or are overwhelmed, stymied and stand still instead of setting out as instructed by God.

Jonah was not unlike the other Old Testament prophets, many, if not all of the prophets challenged God regarding their assignment, verbally sighting their inadequacies, or the hardheartedness of the intended audience. Unlike the other prophets, initially, Jonah never questioned or spoke a word to God; he just moved in the direction opposite to where he was instructed to go, away from Nineveh.

Jonah’s intentional escape from his divine assignment lead him down to Joppa, down into the hull of the ship headed for Tarshish and then he lay down and fell asleep. You might say Jonah attempted to separate himself physically and consciously from God. His intent was to completely move away from God and the people of Nineveh—Gentile,

enemies of the Israelites and although a great city, the inhabitants were not worshippers of Israel's God. It's ironic that Jonah had no interest in sharing God's warning or word with the people of Nineveh, fearing they would repent and God would spare them. From Jonah's perspective, the inhabitants of Nineveh were not worthy, did not deserve God's gracious mercy.

I'll be the first to admit that there are times when I don't or can't see any redeemable characteristics in certain individuals—those who prey on the vulnerable, the poor, young or elderly; those who are seek to enrich themselves at the expense of others; those who govern with no regard for the rights, much less the needs of the disenfranchised, those seeking sanctuary, safety or just the bare necessities in life—I often remind myself that they are God's people too.

Asleep in the hull, the ship is being ravaged by the storm God hurled upon the sea Jonah is awakened by the captain. How can you sleep when we are being tossed about and we are about to perish? How can we sleep, when the rights of the most vulnerable are systematically being stripped away with the stroke of a pen? How can we sleep when people are dying on the streets from addiction, homelessness and exposure to the elements? How can we sleep when there are record cold temperatures, fires, hurricanes and other natural disasters? How can we sleep when nuclear war is being threatened by government leaders arguing about the size of their buttons? How can we sleep when those with the lowest incomes and children are losing their affordable healthcare? How can we sleep when violence is the lead on every news report? Are we asleep?

The non-believing sailors entreated Jonah to pray to his God to save them from the storm, then casting lots to determine who was responsible for this calamity, the lot fell on Jonah. The sailors questioned Jonah, what is your occupation, country and people, and where did you come from, Jonah answered, 'I am a Hebrew; I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'

The unfaithful, disobedient prophet willingly shared the sovereignty of God with the non-believers on the ship, but was unwilling to do the same with the thousands of inhabitants in Nineveh. Matthew 5:44, 45 tells us: *"I say to you to love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."*

Jonah is thrown into the stormy sea so the others might be saved, and unknowingly him as well. Jonah is swallowed up by the water. Water, denoting Baptism, God's gracious sacrament, metaphorically a watery grave from which we arise as new creations, regenerated, and transformed, spiritually united to Jesus the Christ. Jesus was immersed, baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River that we might be saved and as he ascended out of the waters, a dove descended from heaven and the voice of God declared: this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.

Brothers and sisters, the storms in life that toss us about, threaten to swallow us up, and that seemingly drown our present and doom our future, are baptismal waters that cleanse, fortify, prepare and wake us up to do that which God has commanded. There are blessings in the storm.

Henry B. Eyring says: "The great test of life is to see whether we will hearken to and obey God's commands in the midst of the storms of life. It is not to endure storms, but to choose the right while they rage."

Beloved, storms come, some of our own making and others that seem to come out of nowhere. Jonah lay praying in the belly of the big fish for three days and nights, but he was never out of the presence of God. No matter where we go, what we go through, or what 2018 may bring, God is there. May we not be swallowed up, overcome or frightened by life's storms, but strengthened, encouraged, and fortified, like a tree planted by the waters that shall not be moved, rooted and anchored in Jesus Christ who meets us at Table, were we remember his baptism, sacrifice, and promise to be with us always, leads and holds us fast, even in the farthest limits of the sea. Amen.