

Sunday 27th June

Jonah 1

Have you ever heard a story that seems so ridiculous you weren't sure if it was true? Recently on YouTube I've seen a few videos about talking to your younger self or trying to explain the pandemic to my past self. It's funny to watch them and see all the things that have become normal over the past year that would have seemed crazy and unbelievable at the beginning of 2020. And if someone had told us then what things would be like now we would have struggled to believe them.

This story about Jonah seems like it's one of those unbelievable stories. Jonah was a prophet of God, a messenger, but he was not perfect. When we first meet Jonah he has been tasked with taking a message to the people in Ninevah, a wicked city full of wicked people. Instead of obeying God, Jonah tries to run away from God and get as far away as he can from Ninevah. The story only gets stranger from here.

I mean imagine, someone comes to you and says, did you hear the story of what happened to Jonah? God told him to go to Ninevah but instead he tried to run away. He ended up on a boat where he slept through a wild storm that tossed the boat in every direction, then he got tossed overboard by the ship's crew and the storm suddenly stopped. Then the craziest thing happened – he got swallowed by a gigantic fish! And he survived!

That can't be real, can it? It might not seem so crazy if we've heard the story before, but imagine or remember back to the first time you heard it.

Sometimes things happen in our lives that don't seem real. We face circumstances that seem unbelievable. Like for the next year, you'll mostly have to stay at home. You'll socialise over screens or at a distance and you won't be able to hug your family members who don't live with you. You'll go to school and work from home, you'll only be allowed to go for a walk once a day. That's mad! We face situations where we feel trapped or scared or can't see a way ahead, but when we have faith in God, we can rely on God always being with us, even in the strange and unbelievable circumstances we find ourselves.

What often amazes me is just how active God is in the events of Jonah's story. Did you notice? It is God who told Jonah where to go and what message to take, it is God who caused the storm when Jonah tried to run, it's God who makes the sea wilder when the ship's crew try fiercely to row back to shore, it's God who calmed the water when Jonah was tossed overboard. Now, I'm not saying that every difficult and bad situation we face is because God is causing it, but even in those situations God was there. And Jonah knew God was there. Jonah realised he couldn't run from God because God knew where he was and was with him. Isaiah 41:13 says, "For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, "Do not fear; I will help you." Notice that He doesn't say, I'll be with you when times are easy, or, I'll wait until you're panicking before I come close, or I'll watch from a distance. God says, don't be afraid, I'm with you and I will help you. God is with us in every situation.

I wonder if when Jonah was thrown into the water if he thought, "what now?" Was there time to consider climbing back onto the ship before he was consumed by the whale? Did he wonder if he was going to drown before anyone could rescue him?

In the end it was God who sent the huge fish to swallow Jonah. Although being swallowed by a giant fish seems a pretty unfortunate occurrence, it was most likely the thing that saved Jonah and it brought him back to God.

This past year has been a challenge for all of us, and it's been strange, and yet the pandemic experience has not been the same for all of us. Looking back, we will all have different memories, different stories of what stood out to us, what we struggled with, what we enjoyed. But as Christians, I hope we can all say that we knew God's closeness and presence through it all. I hope we can say that despite or maybe because of the hardships faced, we looked for God and found Him to be our rock and a constant presence.

Many people have searched for God during this year and turned to faith looking for peace and hope. We never know what God has in store, but we know his plans and purposes are far greater than ours and beyond our imagination. In Jonah's story, we hear that God has a message for Ninevah, we might think that this story is all about trying to get the Ninevites to change, but in fact Jonah has a lot to change about himself and his attitude and his knowledge of God too. And so, we

see God at work in Jonah's life, changing him, growing him. But there's another group of people affected by Jonah's awful circumstances too – the men on board the ship. We don't know much about these men, it says that they cried out to their own gods so we know they didn't worship the same God as Jonah did and as we do. But when they meet Jonah they're introduced to the one true God, the Almighty, all-powerful God who can command the wind and seas. In verse 16 it says: "the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him."

As we're caught up in the storm and the sea and wondering what will happen to Jonah, these men are awestruck in wonder at God.

When we face bizarre, unreal and difficult circumstances, often God uses those times not only to bring us closer to himself, but to bring others near to Him as well. Others who need to know who he is, who need to see God's power and feel God's presence and know that he can be trusted.

When we have faith and cling to God during challenges, we are demonstrating to other people that we believe in a God that can be relied on and who can give us comfort and hope.

So, when you face unexpected and unusual circumstances, look to God. He will be with you and can use those situations for His glory.