The Ambergris of God

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 7, 2005

Jonah 2:1-9 Psalm 29 Romans 9:1-5 Matthew 14:22-33

I am speaking the truth in Christ— I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. (Romans 9:1-2)

What do you think about in the belly of a fish? Mostly, you think about the fish. You smell the rot of jelly-fish and squid and plankton. You feel its undulating alien motion. You hear the strange groans of the sea, the leviathans calling, the roar of ancient currents.

What do you think about in the belly of a fish? Mostly, you think about the fish, until the darkness is so deep that memory rises up from the deep, a flashing silver blister of remembrance: anger and fear and sadness and hope.

Jonah's great poem captures in song that flashing blister in the abyss. Jonah, who has been running away from God, Jonah so deep in denial that he slept right through a great storm, Jonah so deep in despair that he asks to be thrown into the ocean – Jonah, dying, turns to poetry, to the edge of language, as he slips past the edge of life.

I've spent some time this week with Jonah's poem, looking at translations, trying to capture a language I do not speak. Listen again to his poem, to how Jonah runs back and forth between hope and despair, between his God and the deep blue sea:

"You fling me into the shadow-dark depth,
into the very mind of the waters,
and the flood wraps itself around me.

Your breakers, your swelling waves
bear down on me.

Drowning, my heart cries:
'You have vomited me out.
You will not look at me.
How will I look to your Holiness?'

My soul is filled with turbulent waters,
My head is bound in weeds.

I sink down to the roots of the mountains,
down, and the earth imprisons me
forever.

From the ruin of my life you will bear me up,
my God, my God.

Just as my soul was collapsing,
I remembered God.
O, my prayer, she is flying
to your holy Temple.

Let others keep watch
over emptiness and mists;
they turn away from their own mercy.

Crying in thanksgiving,
I will act for you as I have promised.

Salvation is God's.

If you've been watching the news this weekend, you know that in Russia, seven men know Jonah's physical fear all to well. They spent three days huddled in a submarine trapped on the ocean floor, rescued this morning only at the last minute.

I've spent some time in that submarine darkness as well. Not physically, of course; the cub scout overnight in a World War II submarine off of Chicago's Navy Pier definitely didn't count.

But spiritually and emotionally, I know for me what the belly of the fish looks like. The longest time I spent down there was after my father died of cancer.

Like Jonah, I swung between God and the deep blue sea. Certainly there were wonderful days, weeks, and months. But there were long shadows of binge drinking, and failed work, the hours of Jonah's emptiness.

There was very little prayer.

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I had slipped away from God by the time my father had died, and having lost that anchor, I drifted. For five years I turned my face from God, convinced that God had turned away from me and from my family.

What do you think about in the belly of a fish? Mostly, you think about the fish. You cannot see God's face, or the face of those who are reaching out to you. The further I ran from God, and from my own grief, the darker the waters grew.

Jonah, you may remember, was called by God to preach in Nineveh. And in fear Jonah takes the first ship he can find, headed in the opposite direction. The four short chapters of this book about Jonah take this reluctant prophet across the Levant as he cycles around and around, running from God, running to God, running from God, running to God.

What draws today's lessons together from Matthew and Jonah isn't the common image of drowning. It is the oscillating experience of God.

Peter believes Christ is a malevolent ghost. Then in boldness Peter joins his teacher on the water. And then in fear begins to drown. And then, saved from drowning, in wonder Peter and his friends worship.

In our journey towards God, we might cry out in fear and then in faith and then in fear and then in faith. And that oscillation is the good news of today's sermon.

Our lectionary gives us all of Chapter 2 of the Book of Jonah -- Except for the very last line: *Then God speaks to the fish, and the fish vomits Jonah onto shore.* It is the ambergris of religious experience: the despair of Jonah, the fear of Peter the anguish of Paul. That there is nothing so difficult or heart-breaking, that God is not present.

It is a truth for communities: Churches naturally grow and shrink and grow again. In 1890, only the rector and his family were still coming to Messiah!

And it is a truth I need to hear for myself, for everyone I pray for, for everyone who prays for me. Our souls wax and wane like the moon; prayer might be easy one night, and the next morning may feel dry and distant.

The good news is that when your heart is joyful God is with you. The good news is that when your heart is drowning, God is with you. The good news is that God is with you.

"Take heart," Christ tells us, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

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