**LESSONS FROM JONAH’S ROCK-BOTTOM**

**JONAH 1:17-2:10 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-12**

Good day St. Paul’s United Church, and everyone else tuning in to this service from wherever you are. Thank you for the opportunity to be able to bring the Word to you today. Be greeted in the most Holy Name of the One who was, and is, and is to come!

By now, the entire world knows that Liverpool had won the Premier League- ending a 30-year struggle. As you can see I have my Liverpool shirt on, and so, congratulations to all my fellow Liverpool fans at St. Paul’s. We did it!!! But, the reason I’m starting with this story is that we know the Liverpool anthem is: You’ll Never Walk Alone, and in a video about being champions, the manager, Jurgen Klopp said: ***This is what the world needs right now. To know that in your darkest moment, you are not alone***. And so, in talking about lessons from Rock-Bottom, it is truly important for us all to know and remember: YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

**Let us pray:**

* **Lord, we give you thanks for your grace over our lives. We thank you that you work in us and through us, despite our weaknesses; despite our struggles; despite our disobedience or arrogance. We ask that our hears, eyes, and ears may be open to hear what You want to say to us in this service. In Jesus’ name, Amen!**

I have been reading the story of Jonah as being told by Tim Keller in The Prodigal Prophet- a book I was so graciously blessed with by Christine and Angus Fyne’s Clinton. By the way, if you are looking for some of the best book recommendations, talk to Christine. She always has a book that you MUST read. And this is one of them, for real.

I want to give us three lessons about rock-bottom from the life and story of Jonah.

* One, is that rock-bottom humbles you for the purpose of God’s grace to shine.
* Two is that rock-bottom gives you perspective on life.
* Three is that rock-bottom teaches you to surrender.

And, despite the fact that Jonah may be one of the most familiar stories in the Bible, it is possibly also one of the least understood- even though the entire book of Jonah is ONLY 48 verses long.

But Jonah is a powerful demonstration of one of the most important themes in the Christian faith. And that is the disruptive power of God’s grace in the midst of our rock-bottom moments; the midst of our deep despair; in the midst of a storm; in the midst of the belly of a giant fish. And even in the midst of our disobedience of the tasks God gave us- as in the case of Jonah. His rock-bottom experience came precisely because he didn’t want to do what God asked him to do.

And how many of us find ourselves in unwanted pain, unwanted turmoil and struggle because we went against the thing God asked us to do- like Jonah? How many of us think we are wise in our own eyes and knows best for our lives; knows better than God for our lives, and we make decisions about our futures, without the wisdom and the influence of God, and it costed us dearly. And yet, even then; even when we wilfully choose against God, the disruptive power of grace is able to reach us, and bring us back to God.

This is what is central to the story of Jonah. A lot of people think the story of Jonah is primarily about being obedient to God. It’s a big part of the theological make-up of the story. But it’s God’s undeserving grace; His relentless compassion and pursuit of human beings, that is at the centre of this story. And that is also what is central to our stories. And whether you have plenty to eat or not sure of where the next few months of finances will come from; and whether you are fearing for your life, or worried about the kids’ school year and matric and where they will study next year. His grace is central at all times, in all our lives, under ALL circumstances. His grace and mercy doesn’t change depending on the situation. As Richard Rohr also says, ***“First there is the fall (to rock-bottom), then the recovery from the fall. Both are at the mercy of God.***” In other words, nothing that causes our rock-bottom or our recovery from rock-bottom happens outside the grace of God and the knowledge of God.

And the story of Jonah is a perfect example of this truth. By his own doing and his own choosing; his own disobedience, he ran away from God and yet, the grace of God chased him down and met him there: with the sailors, in the belly of the fish, in the deep waters, and later in the story, when he said to God he wanted to die. Do you also feel sometimes you want to die in your rock-bottom, and instead God meets you there and takes care of you there- in your depression, in your unchanging health, in your brokenness, and also in your good life, with it’s relatively small problems and challenges. God’s grace meets us all right where we are at!

Jonah 1:17 reads, “And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah.” Other translations says the Lord provided, or destined, or orchestrated for the fish to swallow Jonah so that he not die after being thrown overboard by the sailors. And for many of us, the truth is that there has been situation we’ve put ourselves in, deals we made, risks we took, people we let into our lives, that had it not been for the grace of God that intervened in our lives, we would’ve had a much longer and more difficult and more messed up rock-bottom experience. But God appointed, and provided and orchestrated a way out- just like He did for Jonah. And it’s all connected to the grace of God.

Tim Keller says in this book: ***“It is only when you reach the very bottom, when everything else falls apart, when all the schemes and resources are broken and exhausted, that you are finally open to learning how to completely depend on God.***” And then he says, “the usual place to learn the greatest secrets of God’s grace is at the bottom- as Jonah learned it at the bottom of the ocean in the belly of a fish. You see, your rock-bottom will humble you so that God’s grace can lift you. ***As it says in James 4:6 God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble***. Jonah had to be humbled from his self-righteous religiosity; for refusing to go where God sent him. Only when in deep despair did he say in verse 2, When I was in trouble, Lord, I prayed to you, and You listened to me. From deep in the world of the dead, I begged for Your help, and You answered my prayer.

Friends, after rock-bottom has humbled you, the second thing it does is it changes your perspective on life. It changes what we value, what’s important, who is important, what do we hold true. We realize in rock-bottom that relationships, family, connect groups, quality of life over quantity of life is what is important. It’s in the knowing that you’ll never walk alone, that you realize I can lose everything but I have my God and my tribe. That will sustain me. Have you noticed how people change after a health scare, or a family trauma. They stop chasing after the wind because their perspective has shifted.

Jonah’s tune also began to change in his rock-bottom. He becomes aware of the greatness of God and of the smallness of man. That he said, ***“I feel banished from your sight, but nevertheless, I will continue to gaze toward Your holy temple.*** Regardless of what brought me to this rock-bottom place, regardless of the challenges, regardless of what lays ahead, I continue to gaze towards your holy temple. IN verse 7 he says, When my life was ebbing away, I remember You, Lord. This is the perspective that Paul gave the Corinthian church as well when he said to them. ***We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*** What is the perspective that this pandemic is giving you? To finally move out of this country? To finally give up on God because your business did not survive? To give up on relationships? Or do you say like Paul to the Corinthians, we are at our lowest, but we are still here. We will bounce back. We will keep hope and faith alive.

The third thing that happens to Jonah in this rock-bottom prayer is that rock-bottom teaches us to surrender. It teaches us to let go and let God. It teaches us that there’s only so much we can control. The rest we have to open our hands and surrender. By the way, when was the last time you sat with open hands and said, God, I give all to You. I surrender my life, my resources, my story, the unknown, all to you? Or do you only wait until tragedy and crisis and personal challenges happen and THEN you want to pray that prayer? Because the surrender means, I’m acknowledging that God is in charge. I acknowledge that he gives life and good gifts, and grace and blessing. It’s ALL from Him.

Listen to how Jonah had to surrender at the end of his rock-bottom prayer: Salvation comes from the Lord. What is your prayer of surrender in this time? Where do you declare salvation comes from? Yourself? Your bank account? Your job title? Your security? Or do you declare, salvation comes from God alone?

**IT IS WELL STORY**

Horatio Spafford was a successful lawyer and real estate investor in Chicago. He and his wife, Anna, had one son and four daughters and lived a life of philanthropy and service in their church, until 1871 that is. In that year they lost their four-year-old son to scarlet fever and a few months later the great Chicago fire wiped out the majority of their property holdings. They made it through the next two years until, in 1873, tragedy struck again. The Spaffords had planned to visit Europe as a family, but business kept Horatio behind. On the voyage, the ship Anna and their four daughters were traveling on struck another vessel and sank rapidly. Only Anna survived; she sent a hauntingly brief telegram to Horatio bearing the words “Saved alone.”

One can only imagine Spafford’s grief upon receiving the news. It must have been paralyzing. But on his own voyage to meet Anna as his ship neared the place where his daughters had drowned he was inspired to write the lyrics for hymn “It is Well with My Soul.”

I don’t know what is in your life that is challenging, that is painful, that is rock-bottom. But I do know that his song- of which Bethel made a more modern version as well, it has carried many people through troubling time- to say, the grace of God is still enough for me. I surrender to Him. I’m inviting you to listen to this song, to sit with your hands open as a sign of surrender and let the words of it is well, as you remember this man’s story, to let it flow over whatever is struggling to you right now.