

August 16 Worship Transcript

Welcome and Prayer – Eric Litwiller

Children's Story – Carrie Unruh

Good morning children. Thanks for joining me.

Last week, Pastor Rosie introduced Jonah. We learned Jonah was a PROPHET preaching the word of God to the Israelites. In the story, Jonah also became a FUGITIVE someone who runs away. God called Jonah for a special job – to preach to the people of Nineva who were wicked and needed guidance. Nineva was one of Israel's greatest enemies, so Jonah hated the idea and wanted nothing to do with preaching repentance to them. Jonah thought God should destroy Nineva for its evil ways. So, Jonah took off in the opposite direction boarding a boat sailing for Tarshish. On the way, a terrible storm with wind and rain scared the passengers and crew. Jonah took responsibility for the storm and urged the sailors to throw him overboard. That's what they did! Jonah called for help as he was sinking into the depths of the sea. God rescued Jonah from drowning. He sent a big fish (probably a whale) to swallow Jonah. Imagine what it was like trapped in the belly of that fish – its dark as there are no windows, there are lots of strange slimy things floating around you, and whew, the smell was horrible. Jonah remained there for 3 days and 3 nights, so he had lots of time to think about himself and his sin. Jonah prayed, repented, and praised God. Then, God had the big fish spit Jonah out onto dry ground. God called a second time for Jonah to go to Nineva and tell the people to stop sinning. This time Jonah obeyed God.

The story of Jonah reminds us of Hebrews 4:13 which says “Nothing in all creation can hide from Him”. When we don't obey God or do something wrong, we may feel scared, ashamed, embarrassed, or stubborn. Instead of trying to forget it or hide from it, God wants you to tell Him about it and ask Him for forgiveness. Sooner or later you will have to face up to what you did. So ask God for the strength to face your actions as you confess and ask forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 says “If we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong”. The story of Jonah teaches us that 1) we cannot run and hide from God, 2) God hears us when we pray, and 3) God gives us second chances.

Let's pray. Thank you God we don't ever have to hide from You and be alone and lost in our sins. You will forgive us. Amen.

A fun activity to go along with this story might be to create different kinds of fish from Duplos or Legos. You will also find a coloring sheet and a word search attached to the email about this service.

Goodbye until I see you again.

Scripture Reading: Jonah 2 – Michelle Unruh

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.

The Word of God for the People of God. ***Thanks Be to God!***

Sermon – Pastor Phil Schmidt

One of my favorite places on the planet is the “Smith Cabin” in Colorado. Before I was born, my grandparents, LeRoy and Evelyn Smith, had a vision of purchasing land on Mt. Princeton in Colorado and building a cabin. Over the years, the cabin has been a go-to vacation destination for my family and I have been there almost every year of my life. The reason the cabin is so important to me is because it is a place of refuge, away from the regular patterns of life, away from cell phone coverage and Wi-Fi hotspots, up in the mountains where the air is fresh and crisp. Even when life is full of chaos, the cabin is a place I go to reconnect with nature, with myself, and with God.

In the story of Jonah, we remember that he is a prophet at the end of his rope. He was called by God to go to Nineveh, but he disagreed with God’s call perhaps because he didn’t want to “stink” like his enemies, the Ninevites, so he ran away, got on a boat, fell asleep amidst the storm that God sent, and finally had the sailors throw him overboard. At this point in the story, it seems as if Jonah has given up, on his calling, on his life, and he fell into the water, accepting the reality of death.

But even in Jonah’s desperation, God wasn’t finished with him yet. At the end of chapter 1, we read, “Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17). Based on Jonah’s prayer in chapter 2, it seems that as Jonah sank in the water, in his desperation he cried out to God, and God responded to Jonah’s prayer by providing the means for his salvation. God sent a huge fish to swallow him and save his life. Even in the midst of chaos, God provided a place of refuge for Jonah. Jonah, the runaway prophet, had tried to turn his back on God and God’s calling, but God did not turn away from Jonah.

As we have mentioned many times over the last months, we are living through difficult times. The global coronavirus pandemic has caused chaos and upheaval in all of our lives, and the lives of every person around the planet. The whole world has had to adapt and many people have found their lives disrupted and impacted in negative ways. Many people today find themselves in a place of desperation. As I consider my own life, here are some of the people that come to my mind:

My Grandma, Evelyn Smith, who helped build the cabin, my place of refuge, is in a care home in Newton, dealing with dementia and now increased isolation due to the pandemic. This is the reality for many of our elderly family and friends, especially those who live at nursing care facilities. I am grateful for the excellent care that elderly people at nursing homes receive, and I lament the continued isolation and separation from family and friends that many are experiencing in order to stay safe.

I have other close relatives, including my father, who are at higher risk if they would contract COVID-19. This is another reality for many of us. We are mindful of our family and friends who are at higher risk and we choose practices of social distancing and wearing masks in order to care for our loved ones, yet the concern remains constant especially as we know that COVID cases continue to be present in our communities.

My children have been home since March, with much less interaction with friends and neighbors. While we have enjoyed much good family time, this reality has also included a new challenge for our family system, a challenge that weighs heavily on many families in our community and around the world. As parents, we long for our children to develop deep relationships with peers and learn much through classes and interactions at school, and yet the realities of schools reopening in coming weeks are complex and difficult to navigate. It seems like there are no great options and I know many parents are wrestling with these decisions that need to be made.

Additionally, I am mindful of many other people these days who continue to feel the increasing impacts of the pandemic, including teachers and school administrators preparing for a new and unique school year, including healthcare workers caring for people through first response, in hospitals, in doctor's offices, and in nursing homes, and including poor and marginalized people who do not have as much access to economic and healthcare resources and have thus faced increased burden over these last several months.

As you consider your own life, how you are dealing with the chaos and weight of the pandemic, and as you consider the lives of loved ones and others who are negatively impacted by this virus, perhaps you feel like you or others around you are sinking in the chaotic waters. I invite you to remember Jonah sinking in the water and hear again the beginning words from Jonah's prayer:

"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."

If you or others around you are sinking, I invite you to join Jonah's prayer, his call for help. I invite you to join Jonah in trusting that God hears your prayer and longs to provide a place of refuge and salvation for you. I invite you to cry out to God and to others, so that God and our loving community can be a source of hope and strength.

For me personally, I have experienced the pandemic as a pendulum, swinging back and forth between hope and desperation, between gratitude and wondering "how long." As I noticed my own sense of sinking amidst the chaos of everything going on, I was so grateful to be able to go to the Smith Cabin a couple weeks ago. I believe God provided this place of refuge for me and my family, and I was able to experience some renewal through time in the mountains. And, like Jonah in his prayer from inside the fish, I was able to begin shifting my perspective toward hope and thanksgiving, giving thanks to God for my life, for my family, for a time of calm amidst the storms of life. Hear these words from the end of Jonah's prayer: "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.'" (Jonah 2:9).

And yet, when I returned home from the cabin in Colorado, it felt something like being vomited out of a fish, recognizing again the chaos of the world, the difficult decisions related to school, the anxiety and tension that continues to rise, and so on and so forth. And I am realizing more and more not only how grateful I am for a place like the "Smith Cabin", but also my own need for consistent places of refuge in my everyday life.

At the end of Jonah's prayer, he recommitted himself to God's call in his life. He declared "Salvation comes from the Lord." He may still have had concerns and uncertainty with God's call in his life. He may still have not wanted to go to Nineveh, but he had experienced God's salvation and was recommitted to preaching God's message of salvation through word and deed to anyone and anywhere God sent him. So God had the fish vomit Jonah out onto dry land and the story continues. We soon find that God's call in Jonah's life is the same as it was in chapter 1. We soon find that Jonah is displeased with God. The chaos and tension of life remains, yet Jonah has experienced salvation, recommitment, and the beginnings of transformation. Thus at the end of chapter 2, he is ready to follow faithfully even amidst his concerns.

Likewise, I am sensing a call from God to continue onward faithfully and I invite you to join me in this calling. May we be people who recommit ourselves to following the ways of God, revealed most clearly through Jesus, even amidst the continuing chaos all around us. May we declare with Jonah that Salvation comes from the Lord, and may we seek to proclaim and embody God's Good News through our words and actions. And as we recommit ourselves to the ways of loving God and neighbor and stranger and enemy, may we also find consistent places of refuge in our lives to regularly pause and reconnect with God and God's calling. For me, I find these places of refuge through morning prayer, through daily yoga, through consistent exercise and listening to audiobooks. Where do you or where can you find consistent places of refuge in your own life so that you can continue to be a faithful follower of Jesus even amidst these difficult days?

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, may we cry out to God at all times, even in our desperation. May we find places of refuge to reconnect with God. May we recommit our lives to following faithfully. Amen.

Faith Sharing – Sara Hiebert

Life as I knew it changed dramatically on March 13. It's one of those dates that will forever stick in my mind just like a birthday or anniversary. March 13 is the day that Bethesda Home went on Lock-down and the world changed for 55 of my residents and nearly 100 of my staff. All because of COVID-19. A term we were just learning. Our regulators; CMS (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services), KDADS (Kansas Department on Aging and Disability Services), as well as the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) told us we have to close our doors and restrict all visitors from coming in. This included family members, friends, doctors, hairdressers, and even some of our own staff. Within hours our doors were locked and here we are, over 5 months later, and our doors are still locked. This was a moment I never expected nor did I know how or what to do. I was overwhelmed, lost and honestly scared.

Telling families they are no longer welcome in the halls of Bethesda and may only talk to their loved ones through a closed window, via phone, or as we got equipment – Zoom, FaceTime, Messenger was one of the challenges that still has not gotten easier over time. As an Administrator, who am I to separate families? And yet, as an Administrator I am solely responsible for keeping the residents of Bethesda healthy. How do we do this? How will families take the news? I was being tested, and I will say this is one of those times when I pulled strongly on my faith. My everyday prayer became "Lord, please keep the residents and staff of Bethesda safe and healthy." It was simple and direct but it has become my go to everyday, and somedays all day long.

COVID-19 not only changed the world that I work in, but turned my family's life upside down. Brad's job was also considered high risk and so his employer also put extra restrictions on him, during and after hours. Not only did school stop for the kids, but now they were at home, having little parental guidance due to us working so much. Grandparents and other family became off limits for all of us as it was too high risk – for them and for us. I had to tell my kids no to birthday parties with friends. No to camps. No to family get-togethers and no to eating out or going anywhere. Most people didn't understand, some still don't. But it was and still is okay that they don't. My family has made these choices to protect my second family – my Bethesda family. Did I have to go to this extreme, maybe not but I chose to because I love my Bethesda family and I want to protect it as much as my own family. And in doing so, our own immediate family has become closer and have found real joy in just being together. I have found that we were caught up in being on the go (even though we really never did much anyway) but this feels different. We could say No to things and not feel guilty. We could just learn to live on faith and love.

On March 13 I took an active stand at Bethesda Home and told my staff to limit all their exposures to others and to take all safety precautions. For the most part, the majority of all my staff have done this. They have changed their ways to keep our residents safe. If our residents can't see their families, maybe we don't see ours. Every choice and decision has been because of the residents at Bethesda Home. I feel frustrated that our regulators have taken away our resident's voice with all the decisions that have been made. No one at the decision-making level is asking the residents what they want. And so, bringing as much normalcy to the residents is my desire. With most things stripped from them; no visitors, no group activities, no communal dining, no outings, and no hairdresser, the one thing that has stayed consistent is our staff caring for them. To say I am proud of my staff is an understatement. There are no words to say. I am an extremely blessed employee to have the employees I do. They have gone above and beyond these past 5 months. They have learned to go with the flow and change the way they do things nearly every day. Nothing has been routine for them but they have not complained. They have just done it. They have done it for the residents. They too want to give as much normalcy to our residents as they can. And in all of this, our whole Bethesda Family (staff and residents) have grown much closer. We really have become a very tight family.

I was just asked a couple weeks ago if I was afraid. YES! I am afraid of COVID-19 coming into the walls of Bethesda. I am afraid for my residents who are at high risk. I am afraid for some of my high-risk staff. But I am not living in a world of fear. I am no more afraid of COVID-19 than I am of the flu season or of tornado or fire. However, I am not going to sit idle and not follow the recommendations put out there. It is my duty to protect – and if that means making changes like wearing a mask every time I leave my house then I am happy to do that. What I have learned through all of this is life is not about me. It is about those around us. It is about our Sovereign God who is present in all that is happening around us. God knows our needs. He knows our hearts. He hears our prayers. His love and grace has become more and more apparent to me these past 5 months. Our God is truly a loving God and if we take our eyes off of ourselves and turn to Him it is so much easier to see that. Even in the midst of unrest and worry God is near. He is walking alongside us, ready to pick us up when we fall. We just have to trust.

Congregational Prayer – Pastor Rosie Jantz

Today as we gather for prayer let us remember our brothers and sisters who suffer from illness due to the coronavirus or from other diseases; for those who are recuperating from surgery or have surgery in their future. Let us also remember those who live and work at Bethesda Home and in other retirement communities such as Kidron-Bethel and Schowalter Villa. And thank you, Sara Hiebert, for sharing your powerful faith testimony with us this week.

And as always, if you have a specific concern, need prayer or would like a visit by phone or on your porch, please contact me or one of the pastors, and we will be happy to talk by phone or meet you wherever feels most comfortable to do so.

As we come together in prayer, you will hear bits and pieces of Jonah's prayer from chapter 2, coming through. Let's bring our prayers together before God.

Lord, we call on you out of our distress, anxiety, and fear,
and you hear us.

There is no place to hide from you.

No matter how far we run;
no matter what we've done or left undone;
no matter what lurks beneath the murky surface
or what hits us straight away
you are present there.

You see us, hear us, and know us by name, therefore, O God, we trust you with all that we have and all that we are, and we come to you stripped of all pretense. We come because you heard our voice.

Loving Lord, we give you thanks for Sara Hiebert's good and strong leadership at Bethesda Home. Grant her, and all who lead and work at surrounding retirement communities, hospitals and clinics, your strength and wisdom to do the work you have called them to do. We commit each resident into your care and safekeeping and that your love and grace would be present during these times of uncertainty. We do not know what tomorrow holds, but we know who holds it.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

God of mercy, we pray for all who are apprehensive about the upcoming school year. Grant the administrators, teachers and students patience with each other. Steady the nerves of parents as they choose the best options for their children in the days and weeks ahead.

When we get overwhelmed or entangled by decisions or entrapped by the snares of sin, deliver us O Lord.

Make our paths straight so that our walk with you stays on course. Bring us up from the pit and grant us blessed quietness, holy calm and assurance of your saving grace.

Thank you, O God, for loving us, pursuing us, and delivering us from the belly of the fish! We rest our weary souls in you, and give you our lives.

For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing: Hear these words of blessing and assurance from Isaiah 43.

Thus says the Lord -- "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."

God has you! Amen.