

Three ministers were talking about prayer in general and the appropriate and effective positions for prayer. As they were talking, a telephone repairman was working on the phone system in the background. One minister shared that he felt the key was in the hands. He always held his hands together and pointed them upward as a form of symbolic worship. The second suggested that real prayer was conducted on your knees. The third suggested that they both had it wrong--the only position worth its salt was to pray while stretched out flat on your face.

By this time the phone man couldn't stay out of the conversation any longer. He interjected, "I found that the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended forty feet above the ground."

I've prayed in the heat. I've prayed in the cold. I've prayed in the rain. I've prayed in the snow. I've prayed on my knees. I've prayed sitting down. But never have I ever prayed from the belly of a fish.

Today we are moving on to our next category of prayer, prayers of repentance. Radishes of repentance. Our prayer is spoken by the prophet Jonah in what I think we all can agree would be one of the most uncomfortable places to pray. Let's start by looking at the circumstances that made this prayer necessary.

The book of Jonah sits as one of the 12 minor prophets in the Old Testament. Only 48 verses across 4 chapters. In the first verse of this book, he is introduced as Jonah, son of Amittai. Jonah's name means dove. It would be a term of endearment for someone you love. Amittai means truth. Jonah, son of Amittai is the dove of truth.

As you have come to expect by now, God tends to give prophets nasty, nasty jobs. And Jonah was given a doozy. "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me." Nineveh was the capitol city of Assyria. Assyria had been threatening to invade the northern part of Israel for a long time. It's bad enough that they weren't Jewish. They worshipped other gods and they smelled. (Scratch that part about

smelling, I was thinking out loud there) Israel hated Assyria, especially Ninevah. So of course, Jonah hated Ninevah.

The last thing Jonah wanted to do was convince the people of Ninevah to repent. So, when God told Jonah to go this way to Ninevah...Jonah went that way to hop on a boat. The weather was beautiful in Tarshish that time of year.

But the weather on the Mediterranean, not so perfect. A lot of hurling is about to happen. First of all. God hurls up a great big storm on the sea. A storm so big that Jonah's escape boat was in peril. The sailors and the captain? Running about the ship in a panic. Praying to any god that would listen. Jonah? Down in the hull, sound asleep. Not a bit interested in praying to the one God who could fix this. The crew started by hurling cargo into the sea. It wasn't enough.

Why was this happening? They had to get to the bottom of this so they did what any levelheaded person would do at these times. They left it to fate by casting lots. Click, click, click. The lot landed at the feet of Jonah. Gulp. The crew looked at Jonah. Jonah looked at the crew. They rapid fire 4 questions at Jonah.

What is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? Of what people are you? Jonah only answers the last one. Vs 1:9 I am a Hebrew, and I worship (fear) the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Dry land would be really nice right now.

The sailors were afraid of the storm, but they were even more afraid to learn something else. Jonah was running from God. They ask a question with an eerie resemblance to the scene at the Garden of Eden, "What is this that you have done?"

Jonah tells them what must be done. They must hurl him into the sea. The sailors? First, they desperately try to row back to shore. They don't want this decision. If they throw Jonah overboard, an innocent man will die. As much as they hated this idea, they hated the thought of dying even more. One last time they ask Jonah to intervene to God. He refuses.

The sailors do it instead. They don't call out to their gods. They call out to Elohim. They call out to Yahweh. "O, please Lord!"

Picture what would happen if someone like Steven Spielberg produced this scene. We'd have the sailors and Jonah. The sailors put Jonah into the water up to his knees. The storm stops. The sailors pull him up, the storm starts up again. They put Jonah in the water again, this time to his belly button. The storm stops. They pull him up. The storm starts again. One final time, they put Jonah in the water. This time up to his neck. Again, the storm stops. The solution was clear.

Even as God hurled this big storm upon this ship, the sailors hurled Jonah into the sea. Immediately the storm stopped.

A side note on the sailors. They knew what this meant. The God of the Hebrews. Yahweh, Elohim. The Lord must be feared. Not just a little, but greatly. The Lord deserved their offerings. The Lord deserved their vows. Those sailors? Ones that before this, worshipped other gods? They became believers in the Lord.

According to 1:17 The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

God finally had it. Jonah's undivided attention. This is when we get to hear Jonah's prayer of repentance. First Jonah talks about his scrape with death. His battle of the wind, the waves, the water, and the seaweed. He was so very, very tired. Then the prayer takes a 180 turn. Jonah goes from talking about what happened to talking about what will happen. "With a voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed, I will pay. "

In this prayer we find a Jonah who is being honest about his situation. He's in the belly of a stinking fish for heaven's sake. But he's also thinking about how he got into this situation. Yes he is gripped by fear. Yes, he is threatened by death. But Jonah knows all too well how he got into this mess. Jonah refused to preach to those who worship vain idols. God had no choice but

to put Jonah in aquatic custody and only God could release Jonah from this gastronomical detention.

Jonah has accepted the fact that he must go to Ninevah and warn them. But his level of enthusiasm for this mission has not changed. He still doesn't like it. His heart isn't in it. This was a sacrifice. A sacrifice of thanksgiving. He delivered the message, but he didn't do it with any heart at all. In fact, his sermon to the people of Ninevah was only 7 words long. (5 in Hebrew). "Forty days and Ninevah shall be overthrown!"

There is one final thing that Jonah said in his prayer of repentance. Deliverance belongs to the Lord! It didn't matter how Jonah felt. It didn't matter what Ninevah had done in the past. What mattered was how they would react to Jonah's warning.

And in spite of Jonah's lackluster homily, the people of Ninevah. They believed God. They proclaimed a fast. They put on sackcloth, a visible act of repentance. Word reached the king of Ninevah. What would he do? How would he react? He himself took off his robe, put on sackcloth and covered himself in ashes. Then he offered this much more eloquent sermon: By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

How would God respond to these vivid acts of repentance? God would forgive them. God would change his mind and not send destruction to them. This was Jonah's worst fear. God's extreme ability to love and forgive actually made Jonah angry. This wouldn't be the end of Jonah's tantrum. But the rest is a story for another day.

Yes, this prayer of repentance is one of honest confession, and this is a story of the need for God to at times put us in a penalty box until we can get to a place of willingness to obey him.

Jonah's prayers show us how to be honest about our tendency to disobey and about the fact that this can place us under God's judgment.

If we cannot be honest about when we need to be placed under God's judgement, we will never be able to be honest about our need for God's deliverance from that judgment.

There is something else to note in this prayer. Sometimes obedience is a sacrifice. I'd like to think that I would perform those sacrifices more gracefully than Jonah did. But I also don't think we ever have to pretend that obedience is easy.

Church family, what are we being asked to do, that we might meet with grudging disobedience? Let's not end up offering a repenting prayer in a place we thought we'd never end up. But if we do, let's pray that we will be given the radish of repentance to show that we see a better future through sacrificial obedience.