

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
'Church at Home' - Sunday 22nd March 2020

Welcome

“Thank you for signing up to receive our ‘Church at Home’ resources by post. It is a difficult time for us all and I know that many of us are missing going to church and meeting with each other. But while we cannot meet physically for church we can still worship God right where we are. In this letter is a transcript of a video sermon that looks at what we can learn from Jonah about living in a season of social distance. I’ve also included some readings and prayers, and a hymn for you to read or sing. I pray that they will be a blessing and an encouragement to you today.” - *Rev. Andrew Gill*

Call to Worship – Psalm 27

*The Lord is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?*

*One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.*

*For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.*

*Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.*

*My heart says of you, “Seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, I will seek.*

Collect for the 4th Sunday in Lent

Almighty God,
you have delivered us from the death of sin
and raised us to new life in your love,
through our Saviour Jesus Christ;
and in baptism you have made us one with him
so that now we are the children of light.
Grant that we may walk in his light
and show forth your glory in the world;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.*

Reading – Jonah 2:1-10

*Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,
‘I called to the Lord out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep,*

*into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
Then I said, "I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?"
The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me for ever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O Lord my God.
As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!'
Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*

Sermon - "Living in the Belly of the Fish"

What is the best thing to do as we live in this season of social distancing?

Life has changed very quickly for all of us. This morning I am sitting in our church building and I am all alone. The church is empty and the streets are quiet outside. Most of the shops and restaurants are closed, and those that are open have queues outside only allowing a few people in at a time.

Everyone is practicing what is called *social distancing*. We are all doing our part to minimise our contact with others to keep the infection rate below what the health service can cope with. For many of us the hard reality of social distancing is starting to take hold and the cost is already making an impact.

And I think if there is any person from the Bible that can sympathise with us at this time it would be the prophet Jonah.

Jonah was a man of God, and the word of the Lord came to him and told him to go and preach to the city of Nineveh. But Jonah didn't want to go so he ran away. Rather than getting on a donkey and traveling around the desert to Nineveh he got on a boat and went in the opposite direction! While he was on the boat it got caught in a terrible storm and Jonah tells the crew what he has done and they throw him overboard. And the raging sea grew calm.

As Jonah sinks to the bottom of the deep God commanded a big fish to swallow him up. For three days and three nights Jonah lived in the belly of the fish.

Can you imagine what that must have been like? It must have been dark and cold. Smelling worse than your food waste bin on a hot summer's day. He would have been terrified, confused, and lonely. But he was alive.

As I read through this story I ask myself was this judgement or salvation? Was God rescuing Jonah from the storm or was he punishing him for running away? Either way the forced isolation gave Jonah time to think and reflect. Life has been paused and he now has time to face up to all the thoughts and emotions he was running away from.

Then after three days and three nights Jonah ch.2 v.1 says that Jonah prayed, *"From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God."*

Our message this morning is as simple as this: *pray*. Prayer is not our last resort, it is our first response. As we enter into a new week of being socially distant from each other let us not be spiritually distant from God.

One of my favourite verses in scripture is Philippians ch.4 vv.6-7, *“Do not worry about anything but pray about everything. With thanksgiving bring your needs to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”*

So today wherever you are reading this... pray. If you are worried about the uncertain future then pray. If you are worried about getting sick then pray. If you are worried about your finances in this situation then pray. If you are feeling lonely in your isolation then pray for God's compassion. If you are struggling to adjust to all the changes then pray to God for strength. If all the bad news is causing you to despair then pray for God to give you hope and help those in need.

We don't need to be in a church building to be close to our Heavenly Father. The God of peace is always near. And when we pray His peace will protect our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Jonah ch2 v7 says, *“When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.”* The story of Jonah goes on, and after Jonah had prayed God commanded the fish to spit Jonah out on the dry land. He is given a second chance and this time he obeys and goes and preaches repentance to Nineveh.

This season of social distancing will end. But as we live in the belly of the fish let us remember the Lord, pray to him, and repent. Allow God to change us and transform us further into the likeness of his Son. So that at the end of our isolation we will emerge as a better and kinder people, filled with the peace of God.

Amen.

Hymn 89 - Great is Thy Faithfulness

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee,
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not,
As Thou hast been, Thou forever wilt be.

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided

Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above;
Join with all nature in manifold witness,
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.

Thomas O. Chisholm, 1866-1960
adapted Jubilate Hymns

Benediction

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard my heart
and my minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.