



Some years ago, early in my ministry, a friend of mine one day asked how things were going. It had been one of those weeks that became very busy with everything but what I had planned to do. I am a compulsive list maker, and at the beginning of each week I make a list of my goals, tasks, meetings, and all the other things I have to do for the week. That particular week I had not checked many items off my list so I remarked that *I could get some ministry done if it weren't for all of the interruptions*. That was probably not the best way to phrase what I was feeling at the moment, but it is what I said. In his wisdom he offered me a really great response, saying *Dave, maybe the interruptions are the ministry*. That was a great response, even though the truth of it stung me at the time. In the years since, I have never allowed myself to forget those words, and I have tried to live with the knowledge that much of ministry is not planned, but comes to us in the moment, moments we sometimes think of as interruptions, because they crash into our otherwise carefully planned schedules and lives.

As we continue our study of Jonah this morning we come to the most familiar part of the story, where Jonah is swallowed by the great fish and spends three days in the belly of the fish before being expelled (that's a more polite word than the one the Bible uses) back onto dry land. This part of the story was a great interruption in the life of Jonah, and it was a much-needed interruption because he has some important lessons to learn.

Follow along as I read our Scripture text for this morning, which is Jonah 2:1-10, and then we will talk about a few of those lessons –

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.*

That ends on a rather picturesque image, doesn’t it?

Allow me to ask you two questions this morning to set the tone for my message. I hope you will think about them. I hope you will ponder them. I hope you will let them sink deep into your heart. First, how many *interruptions* have you experienced in life? By interruption, I mean some event or experience that triggered a time of questioning, perhaps a moment of suffering or difficulty, or perhaps a moment of conflict. Perhaps it was recent, perhaps a long time ago. It was a moment that interrupted your otherwise planned out schedule at that moment in your life. And second, did you see that interruption as an opportunity for ministry? Those interruptions that we experience in life, those interruptions that we do not welcome and do not want, can become, in God’s hands, what we call a *teachable moment*. They are teachable moments because they are opportunities that God can use to bring us to a moment when we can step into a time of ministry, a ministry that can make a tremendous difference in our lives and the lives of others.

I don’t know what was going on in his life when God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, but going to Nineveh was obviously not a part of Jonah’s plan. Here is the thing about God’s interruptions in our lives – they are often moments we would do not welcome and are moments we would avoid if at all possible, but still they come our way, and they can become opportunities to learn something God desires to teach us.

Jonah had some things he needed to learn in his time of interruption, and the first one is –

1. *Jonah needed to learn his love for others was too limited.*

My father was a steelworker. As he began his work in the mill he moved up to increasingly better jobs, moving from cleaning blast furnaces to eventually a job in the lab. His job in the lab was to analyze the purity of the steel. He would test to see not only if the steel was impure, but how impure it was, because those impurities weakened the steel. Wouldn’t it be great if we had such a test for love? Wouldn’t it be great if we could perform a test that would tell us how pure our love is and how Christ-like our love is? A test that would tell us what are the impurities that weaken our love. Our love is, frankly, never as expansive as it needs to be. Our love is, quite frankly, limited because of the many things in life that keep us from seeing others and loving others as God intends. It is, unfortunately, a truth about our love that we must acknowledge, and that is that it is never as pure as it needs to be.

The story of Jonah dates to the time when the people of Israel were coming back to their homeland after decades of captivity in Babylon. Upon their return to their homeland they found the Babylonians had populated it with a variety of nationalities and ethnicities, and the returning people did not at all approve of the presence of these people in their land. Their love was not at all the pure love that God desired it to be. They were distrustful of those who were not like them. They were distrustful of people of other nationalities and people of other ethnicities. They became more tribal in their thinking and this caused them to believe that God confined his love and grace only to them.

When you read the pages of Scripture we find God is, time after time, seeking to stretch people’s hearts and minds to be accepting and loving of others. In the Gospels we find Jesus trying to open the hearts and minds of people to love others. In the letters of Paul we find him encouraging the churches not reject the Gentile people. This is the lesson God sought to teach to Jonah, a lesson Jonah was not open to learning.

And here we are today, in our modern age, still suffering from the same deficiency of heart and mind and the same impurity of love. For all of our supposed openness today, so many hearts and minds

remain closed to others. It's not just one group of people who suffer from this deficiency and impurity of heart and mind, but all kinds. People of all manner of perspectives gather in their groups and in various ways assert their pride in their belief that they are favored by God over all others or that God loves them more than he loves others.

When Jesus calls us to love others, he really means it. Jesus called us to love our neighbors. And when he said to *love your neighbor as yourself* (Luke 10:27) one of the teachers of the law asked *and who is my neighbor?* (Luke 10:29) I hear a great deal of smugness and arrogance in his voice as he asked Jesus that question. He was, I believe, seeking to excuse himself from who he was called to love. It's tough to love other people. Some people seem to work really hard to make themselves unlovable, don't they? But we are called to love them anyway. The Ninevites were people. They weren't enemies of God, but his children. Jonah could not see this. He had erected a border beyond which he did not want to go in terms of loving others. Is it possible that we erect borders? Is there a limit beyond which we will not go when it comes to loving others?

2. *Jonah needed to learn that God is relentless in pursuing all people with his love.*

C. S. Lewis spoke of God's relentless pursuit of him. He wrote that *I had a notion that somehow, besides questing, I was being pursued...night after night, feeling whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.*

Lewis fought against the love of God. He didn't believe. He didn't want to believe, but he came to understand God's love and grace and received it, even though he was, at first, reluctant. God is relentless in his pursuit of us, and of all people. The time in the great fish was a time of reflection and reorientation for Jonah. His dire circumstances, as is often the case, grabbed his attention. Unfortunately, his attention quickly reverted to his old prejudices as soon as he was back on dry land. It's hard to maintain the sense of conviction that often accompanies our times of struggle, but it is imperative that we learn from those moments. Richard Rohr says, *we seldom go freely into the belly of the beast. Unless we face a major disaster like the death of a friend or spouse or loss of a marriage or job, we usually will not go there. As a culture, we have to be taught the language of descent. That is the great language of religion. It teaches us to enter willingly, trustingly into the dark periods of life. These dark periods are good teachers.* Jonah's experience in the great fish was a great teacher, but he turned out to be a poor student, quickly forgetting what he had learned in his time of adversity.

3. *Jonah needed a lesson in grace.*

The sad part of the story of Jonah is this – it wasn't just his mission that bothered him, but the idea that his mission might succeed. Jonah did not want to see the Ninevites repent; he wanted to see them destroyed. Jonah, unfortunately, had no sense of grace for the Ninevites.

There are a lot of interruptions in our world, and some of them are to get our attention, just like God sought to get the attention of Jonah. Interestingly, however, it's not always our interruptions he uses to get our attention, but also the interruptions that come in the lives of others. Those interruptions are reminders that we are called to step into the lives of others and bring God's grace to them. We now have a date for the arrival of a refugee family that our church will help to settle. They are a Burmese family, currently in the country of Malaysia, and the family is comprised of the parents and six children – 4 daughters and 2 sons – ages 3 to 19. When I think about that family – and the many others like them – I wonder what would it be like to live in a refugee camp? Some of those families live in the camps not just for weeks and months, but for years. There are some families who have lived in refugee camps for as long as ten years! What would that be like? Imagine that kind of interruption in life. Imagine trying to provide for your children and trying to keep them safe from the violence, the war, the rape and the

other weapons used against those who are so vulnerable.

Here is what is important to remember about interruptions – it is not just the interruptions in our lives we must be concerned about, but also the interruptions in the lives of others. We live in a world where millions have seen their lives interrupted by war, by famine, by oppression, and by so many other difficulties. We are called to minister to those lives, just as Jonah was called to minister to the Ninevites.

What are the interruptions in your life? What might God be trying to teach you with those interruptions? And what about the interruptions in the lives of others? What might God be asking us to do to provide ministry in those interruptions? Remember, don't see them as interruptions, but as opportunities!