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God Promises Us Deliverance

By The Rev. Sam Sheridan

It has been my lifelong reflection that many, if not most, devoted Episcopalians at some point worry that they are not “properly religious.” There are many versions of this worry, and sometimes it isn’t even worry at all. But there are people who reflect on their own faith with a darkness, a sadness, a feeling of inadequacy. I see it especially among people who compare their experience of faith to someone else’s. Another person’s witness, testimony, or story can make us feel like “*Why isn’t my faith like theirs?*”

That comparison is very normal, and it has a very predictable result. That’s because we compare our “inside” to someone else’s “outside,” and we’re likely to come up short every time.

When I ponder this, it always brings me back to the Prophet Jonah. In his story may be the secret to each of us relaxing and being more gentle with ourselves when we’re worried about our own religious adequacy.

The Book of Jonah packs a lot into a very short text. You may remember God called Jonah to preach to an enemy people, the Ninevites, and Jonah immediately runs away to the furthest corner of the world he can name. He volunteers to be thrown overboard to save the ship – for he could run no further from God than sinking into the depths of Sheol/Hell. Jonah was swallowed up and let's say... "rescued"... by a giant fish.

What most people don't remember is that once Jonah is spewed onto the shores near Nineveh, he marches only part way into the city and says exactly five words, in Hebrew, about how they should repent, which in English is, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

That's right. Even after the scene with the giant fish, which inspired countless artists for thousands of years, Jonah is still grumpy and disillusioned and hoping his own mission will fail. He does the absolute bare minimum which technically fulfills what God has asked. Then Jonah sits on a nearby hill hoping that his enemies will fail to repent, that God will find cause to destroy the Ninevites, and that Jonah himself will simply die. "What good is it to live," Jonah wonders, "if God will just love and forgive his enemies?"

Now, I don't think we're Jonah, constantly running away, or doing the absolute-bare minimum all the time, or for his constant grumpiness and multiple death wishes. I don't think we're Jonah experiencing genuine rage that God has the audacity to be more loving than we personally would like to be.

I don't think we're Jonah because, in fact, most of us do not spend a majority of our lives like Jonah being obstinate and deeply opposed to what we think God wants from us. However, the biblical witness is that even if we were, God's love, purpose, and forgiveness would still manage to unfold around us. In the darkest, deepest, furthest pit, as far away from God as we can imagine, God can hear our silent watery cry and reach into the depths to save God's beloved children. We can never be further than God can, or will, come to find us.

If there are times when we reflect on our faith and feel inadequate, it may behoove us to remember that the Bible really doesn't describe how everyone should be perfect, and wonderful, and really into what God is doing all the time.

The Bible actually describes how people are continually, constantly, mind-bogglingly inadequate, and messing up, and faithless – generation after generation – and God still promises deliverance, rescue, and salvation anyway. Faithfulness simply is God's response to us, even the very least we manage to do.

If on the Day of Judgment, I'm grumpy, bitter, confused, ornery, and looking like I've been traveling via fish, the very worst I will be is like Jonah – deeply beloved and saved by Almighty God and welcomed into the loving arms of Christ.