

## “Saved by the Whale”

Bryn Athyn Cathedral - May 24, 2020

Rev. Solomon Keal

*“Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.  
And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” (Jonah 1:17)*

The story of ‘Jonah and the Whale,’ or ‘Jonah and the Great Fish’ is a well known Bible story. It’s a story that is often depicted in artwork. You may have memories of hearing this story as a child. I think we often think of this story as a young child would: a kind of fairy tale in which a big friendly (possibly anthropomorphic) whale came and gently scooped up Jonah, rescuing him, and setting him safely on the shore.

As adults however, our rational minds might start wondering about how this story could have literally happened as written. What kind of sea creature was this? Was it a large marine mammal like a whale, or was it a giant fish such as a whale shark? How could a human being survive in the mouth and/or digestive system of an underwater creature for three days? Did Jonah perhaps die and come back to life, just as this story prophecies the Lord’s resurrection in the Gospels? (see Matt 12:39-41) Did he have some sort of near-death spiritual experience? The Writings of Swedenborg seem to indicate that this was in fact an historical account (see AE 401:18; SE 1391). But for many people in the world, this is the story that leads them to doubt the veracity of the literal sense of the Word.

Fortunately, in the New Church, we know that the most important part of the Word is not the literal sense, but the internal sense. I’m happy to leave behind the technical analysis of exactly *how* the Lord’s miracles could have worked, and instead focus on the symbolism. What does this story teach us about our spiritual lives today? That is where its true value lies. That is where we find the Truth.

That being said, I would like us to take a minute to imagine what it might have actually felt like for Jonah in this story. Jonah had been thrown into the cold and stormy sea, and was afraid that he would drown. He was probably thinking that things couldn’t get any worse. And then they got worse. Because the next thing he sees is a set of massive jaws coming right at him. He probably wasn’t thinking: “Oh good, I’m being rescued by this friendly whale!” I’m sure being eaten alive was not the rescue he was hoping for. He was certainly already afraid, and now I’m guessing his heart-rate skyrocketed as he was swallowed whole by a giant sea creature.

And today, I’d like us to think about the things in our spiritual lives which are like this. What are the things that bring up great fear for us, and yet are actually our salvation. What are the things that rescue us spiritually, which we really would rather not be rescued by?

So let’s look at the symbolism of each part of this story. First of all, what does Jonah represent? The Writings of Swedenborg tell us that “*Jonah in Hebrew signifies a dove, which, in the spiritual sense, signifies the good of charity*” (AE 443.5). We could think about “Jonah” as representing the good, heavenly part of us, that is kind and loving. “Jonah” symbolizes the part of us that communicates closely with the Lord, the way a prophet communicated with Jehovah. And very often what the Lord communicates to that part of us is that we need to preach repentance to our own bad habits. “Nineveh” represents the false and negative thinking which builds up the fortified city of negative behavior in our lives (see AC 1184, 1188, 1192, 6367.8). But when we get that message from the Lord, we often would rather do anything else than to

have to face our own bad habits, and so that good part of us, the Jonah part of us, can sometimes get lost and misguided, and fail to follow the Lord's directions. Jonah went the opposite direction of Nineveh, towards Tarshish, and ended up in a boat, lost at sea. The stormy sea is a sign of the inner turmoil we experience when we go opposite to the path the Lord (and our conscience) knows is best for us. The sailors in the boat are like the parts of us that recognize that something is wrong in our lives, but we don't understand why. We find ourselves "casting lots" to determine what's wrong. Meanwhile, the good part of us - Jonah - is asleep; spiritually unconscious and unaware.

When the good part of us does wake up to our spiritual state, then the evil spirits attack us with feelings of guilt and shame. "You are supposed to be working on your bad habits, and you're not!" They want to pull us down into the depths of the "sea," which represents hell (see AE 538:11). And sometimes that good part of us can be convinced by the evil spirits that we *deserve* to be in hell, just as Jonah told the sailors that he *should* be thrown into the sea. 'Water' normally represents truth, but evil spirits twist the truth into falsity and try to use it to pull us down into states of hell. As it says in *Secrets of Heaven*: "*Being in hell has nothing to do with location and everything to do with state of mind*" (AC 1691.5). Evil spirits point out all of our mistakes and failings, and try to use them to condemn us. And the Writings say that the force of the hells is as massive and overwhelming as the force of the entire ocean (see AC 1661, 1692.2, 8175; TCR 68, 123).

But fortunately the Lord can rescue us from this state. And so He sends a giant sea monster to eat us up?! The teachings for the New Church have a number of things to say about great sea creatures like whales. In one sense, "*big sea creatures symbolize general categories of facts*" (AC 42). So in one sense of this story, what rescues us from the falsities of the hells is naturally the truth. And often it's first the truth in a *general* sense. For example: 'The Lord loves everyone,' or 'everyone is created for heaven, not hell.' These general facts can in fact rescue us from the twisted false thinking of the evil spirits. And those truths might seem as majestic, powerful, and beautiful as witnessing a blue whale in the ocean (see Psalm 104:24-26).

But Jonah didn't just *see* a whale, he was *eaten* alive by one. I think most whale-lovers would not actually want to be eaten by a whale. So what does Jonah being *eaten* by this creature symbolize? The Writings indicate that Jonah being in the belly of the whale is a symbol for times of "temptation" or spiritual struggle in our lives (see *Secrets of Heaven* 247, 756, 1691.5, 2788.1-2, 4728:5, 6726, 8278:3, 9050:10; *Apocalypse Explained* 518:38, 538:11, 622:9, 750:14; *Prophets and Psalms* 212). Temptations are a battle that is going on inside of us between truth and falsity, goodness and evil. Temptations are a state in which the Lord preserves us from drowning, even while we're in the midst of hell. Temptations, or spiritual struggles, are not pleasant. They're about as pleasant as being eaten alive by a giant sea creature.

And yet, the Lord allows us to go through temptations, because they can save us from being completely overwhelmed by the hells. In the midst of temptations, the Lord is carefully preserving the good part of us (Jonah) from the overwhelming drowning power of the hells (the sea). While in temptations, we are still in hell - still in the sea - but we are protected by the Lord from being spiritually drowned. As it says in *New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine*:

*"Crises of the spirit [or temptations] help goodness in us gain control over evil, and truth gain control over falsity. They help reinforce truths and join them to goodness and at the same time shatter evils and the falsities that arise from them. They also serve to open our inner, spiritual self and bring our earthly self under its control, break up our love for ourselves and for the world, and tame the cravings that arise from them. Once this has*

*been done, we come into enlightenment and gain a perception of what is true and what is good, and of what is false and what is evil. This gives us intelligence and wisdom, which then keep growing day by day. During our spiritual crises the Lord alone is fighting for us.” (NJHD 194-195)*

I think most of the time when we go through temptations or spiritual struggles, we don't necessarily see that the Lord is fighting for us, or that this is good for us in any way (see NJHD 187). But there is a part of us - the Jonah part of us - that *can* recognize that goodness. When Jonah was in the belly of the whale he didn't complain or apparently even react with fear. He said a prayer to the Lord. And amazingly, it was a prayer of thanksgiving! He acknowledged the pain and suffering he was going through, but he acknowledged it while also trusting in the Lord's Providence (see AC 3880:9). Because it's the Jonah part of us that can recognize the ways in which going through temptations can be good for us. It's that part of us that knows that the Lord is fighting for us, by sending us this "whale." It's the Jonah part of us that can say: "Even though this is really hard and pretty scary, I think this is going to be good for me in the end." Jonah was in the whale for three days and nights, which symbolizes that temptations have a cycle to them, and they do eventually come to completion (see AC 2788, 4495; AR 505; SS 29; TCR 211; AE 532), and we can find ourselves standing on dry ground again.

As a natural example of this, we could think about the coronavirus pandemic, a situation in which we're all in the same "boat" to a certain extent. Of course the Lord didn't send this virus, any more than He directed Jonah to head towards the stormy sea. But in many ways this virus means that people are going through hell right now. There is pain, fear, grief, exhaustion, stress, overwhelm. The hells want to use those things to pull us down. For many of us, this quarantine might feel as claustrophobic as being trapped in the belly of the whale. It might be hard to see how it is helping. But it's the Jonah part of us - the goodness of charity in us - that can look at the ways that safety precautions are difficult and unpleasant for us personally (like being in a whale), and yet see them as ways of potentially helping our neighbors, and thus keeping charity alive in the world - keeping Jonah alive.

It's been amazing to watch people coming up with beautiful creative ways of finding joy, connection, and especially opportunities to help others in the midst of this hellish situation. This challenge is forcing us to rely less on our traditional externals of worship, and could end up teaching us to focus more on the internals of worship. It might be unpleasant, but it might be good for us in the end. I think it's a little bit like watching Jonah, alive and well, being vomited onto the shore by a whale. A kind of messy, surprising, gratitude for the goodness that is somehow still alive in this world.

As another example, we could also think about times when we've said something unkind to one of our friends. What the Lord wants us to do in those situations is walk to Nineveh and preach repentance - go say sorry to our friend. But sometimes we walk the other way. And when we do that, it's as if the Jonah part of us - the goodness of charity - has gone to sleep in our boat. But it's not long before the Jonah part of us wakes up and sees the situation that we've gotten ourselves into; a stormy sea. The hells want us to feel shame for the ways that we've been unkind. They want us to be drowned in the sea. The "whale" in this case is like that little bubble of simply knowing that we need to go apologize. The goodness of charity is kept alive in that, even while we are going through hell as we struggle with both wanting and not wanting to do

what we know is right. But the Lord protects us during those times, so that hell doesn't completely overwhelm us, and we have the chance to live another day and follow through on our apology.

We could also think about other struggles that come up in relationships. Picture a married couple going through difficult times. They might be struggling to communicate in more healthy ways. They might be struggling to find appropriate ways of expressing difficult emotions to their spouse. They might be struggling with the ways that the differences in their personalities highlight their negative traits as well as their positive ones. They might be struggling to find connection in a life where everything seems to pull them away from each other. The hells want to use all of those things to pull us down, and couples can feel like they are going through hell in those situations. But the Lord sends "whales" to swallow those couples up. I know couples have sometimes looked back on struggles they've gone through and realized that those struggles helped them learn to communicate better and strengthen their love. It was scary and no fun at the time, like being swallowed alive by a sea creature, but in the end it saved their relationship. It's the Jonah part of us, that can sometimes even recognize that while we're in the midst of our own "belly of the whale."

As we get ready to celebrate Memorial Day, we could also think about soldiers. War is hell. It's a stormy, raging sea. When soldiers fight for their country, they go through hell, like Jonah being thrown into the sea, sometimes even losing their lives in the process. But even if a soldier loses their physical life in the hellish sea of war, the Lord can miraculously save the "Jonah" inside soldiers who are willing to sacrifice their life for their country. The Lord said, "*greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" (John 15:13). That is Jonah - the goodness of charity - being kept alive and well inside the "whale" of the struggle to protect what is good in the face of evil. That "Jonah" lives on in this world, even as soldiers may move on to the next world. That "Jonah" lives on in any form of goodness that the Lord preserves in the midst of struggles.

So as you face your own spiritual struggles, I hope that the Lord can give you that sense - as Jonah had - that He is using this struggle to preserve goodness in your life. It may be scary, painful, or difficult. But there may also be a time when you can look back on it - as Jonah looked back at the sea from the safety of dry land - and say a prayer of thanksgiving for the ways that the Lord preserved and rescued goodness in your life. As it says in Psalm 139:

*"Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.... I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.... Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."* (Psalm 139:7-10, 14-15, 23-24) Amen.

#### **Lessons:**

*Jonah 1 & 2; Matthew 12:39-41; AE 622:9; NJHD 194-195; Psalm 139:7-24*