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 Texts: Jonah 1 and 2 (selected verses); Matthew 12: 38-40  
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### In the Belly of the Whale

Several months ago I shared a story in our newsletter that has continued to captivate me. Since I'm not sure how many people actually read the newsletter, I'm bold enough to repeat the story here.

It's the story of a novelist and poet from Iceland named Sjon. He has small house on the coast of Iceland that he uses for writing. One day, he was taking a bath, and suddenly the water began sloshing around, while the house itself trembled. It was a minor earthquake, and while Sjon was a little uneasy, it passed, and he ceased to think of it. About a week later, while taking a break from his writing, he walked down to the ocean, and to his surprise he found a whale beached on the shore. Other such whales were also found along the coast, and Sjon suspected that it may have been due to the tremors he experienced - perhaps it somehow scrambled their orientation. In any case, there was nothing he could do for the whale, and it soon died. Then the carrion and the scavengers came. They slowly devoured the carcass and Sjon watched them. In time, he observed birds disappearing into the carcass, and soon, he did the same. He crawled into the belly of the whale. The stink and the gore were something awful, but while he was there, he retrieved a bone from the whale's ribs. It was slick, and he had to wrestle it away from the remainder of the skeletal structure. Then he retrieved another bone, this one from the shoulder of the whale. He emerged into the light, and made his way back to the house. He stripped before entering - the smell of death was everywhere upon him. The bones were left in the yard, where the sun and the rain and the snow washed away the putrid film. It was three years before they were sufficiently cleansed to enter the house. When they were, Sjon hung them in his writing room, one bone on one wall, with the other bone on the opposite side of the room. Thus, all of his thinking, all of his imagining, all of his writing, takes place within the belly of the whale.<sup>1</sup>

I love that story for the way it hearkens back to the story of Jonah. But I also love it for the way it connects to other cultures as well. Most every culture contains somewhere within its mythology the story of a man swallowed by a fish, where he undergoes a great transformation. The Greeks and the Romans had versions of the story, as do many indigenous cultures. Not surprisingly, it shows up in our own canon of popular culture: if you remember *The Empire Strikes Back*, you might recall how the heroes unwittingly land the Millennium Falcon in the belly of a great beast, which shortly expels the heroes, where they fly off to a fateful reckoning. As for this community, if you've ever experienced a sweat lodge ritual with our friends in South Dakota, you've lived through something similar, entering a womb like structure that temporarily intensifies your existence, until you're spewed forth once again upon the earth, reborn, transformed.

What is the belly of the whale? It is, first and foremost, a space closely akin to death - like the rotten whale that Sjon entered. It is a coffin, saturated by the smell of decomposing life. It is, thus, a terrible and terrifying space - lonely, claustrophobic, entombed. But the belly of the whale also doubles as a maternal womb, a place where new life emerges. In the Jonah story, it's

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<sup>1</sup> "Into the Belly of the Whale with Sjon," by Sam Anderson. Published in *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 16, 2022.

not an accident that the great fish actually saves and protects Jonah from the sea. But it is more besides. It is a space of dreaming, of reverie, and of contemplation - like Werner Herzog's Cave of Forgotten Dreams. It is the space from which creativity and truth emerge. But perhaps it's even more still. The whale's belly is a space for the clarification of one's priorities as a human being, a place where insight is born, especially when one has been running away from revelation. Above all, then, the belly of the whale is a zone of heightened spiritual and emotional intensity, a space of magnified awareness. It's terrible in there. But if we have the courage to withstand it, it's where transformations occur.

That's what happens in the book of Jonah. He attempts to flee the presence of God by boarding a ship. When a storm threatens to capsize the boat, the terrified sailors toss Jonah overboard, where a great fish swallows him. What's most remarkable about the story is what happens within the belly of the fish. Jonah prays. And it's a beautiful prayer. It's something closer to a poem, a song, a blues lament. It's a prayer meant for all of those who find themselves confined, trapped, entombed or enwombed. "The waters closed in over me," Jonah says. "The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped around my head." But then he continues, "As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy Temple." At the conclusion of the prayer, the song concluded, God speaks to the fish, and it vomits Jonah up onto dry land.

Not long ago I was talking to a friend, and she attempted to convey to me the emotional and spiritual exhaustion she was feeling. It had to do with two plus years of a pandemic, but it also had to do with the increased volume of expectations she was facing, the urgency that even small tasks took on, and the sense - well grounded as it happens - that things aren't well in the world around us. You don't need me to enumerate the ways. I have a hunch that even those of us who tend to have sunnier dispositions feel some variation of that lament. I'll also note that even the most hopeful people I know have seemed shaken and destabilized in the past several weeks. If we were given to speaking in verse, we might use words like Jonah's: the deep has surrounded us. It feels like the waters - chaos itself - are closing in over us. Some days when we wake up, it feels like weeds are wrapped around our heads. Might it be that we ourselves have become Jonah of late, not only tossed about at sea, but tossed into the sea? Might it be that we are living in the belly of the whale even now?

I've come to believe that that's precisely where we are. We are living in the belly of the whale. What I'd like to do in the time that remains is to offer several pieces of encouragement and perspective derived from the story of Jonah.

First, if it's true that that's where we reside, I wish to encourage you to trust that the belly of the whale is a space in which God is going to work on us. Yes, it's scary, and yes, it's painfully dark, but the belly of the whale is also where spiritual insights and revelations are most likely to take place. I was reminded of that recently when I read Tom DeWolf's book *Inheriting the Trade*. As he and his family reckon with the legacy of their ancestors' demonic work in the slave trade, they visit the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. That's where tens of thousands of captive Africans were held before being forced across the Middle Passage. At one point, the family visited a dungeon within the castle where the captives were kept. A film crew accompanied them, and the battery pack on the camera lights suddenly went out. Total darkness descended upon the family. A few moved to exit the room, or to find other sources of light, but the leader of the journey suggested that they sit in the darkness. She asked them simply to inhabit the moment, and to feel what they felt without moving to minimize or hide it. She urged them to be still, and to trust that something valuable and necessary was happening within that enclosed space. All

was quiet, but for a few stifled sobs. They were in the belly of the whale. For many family members, that was the pivotal moment that allowed them to fully absorb the anguish their ancestors had unleashed. It changed them in profound ways, opening them to pain, yes, but also to empathy, understanding, and even healing.

Our moment may not be as dramatic as that, but I would urge a similar calm upon us. If we too are dwelling in the belly of the whale, then perhaps, instead of rushing toward the light, we also might quiet ourselves, and sit for a while. I won't make you do it here, but what if we managed to trust that even in the darkness we're experiencing, with the weeds wrapped around our heads, God was at work among us and within us? What if we could calm our anxieties, and quiet the panicked voices that are even now arising in our heads, trusting, as Melville once put it, that "every significant revelation partook of more darkness than light?" It's true that sooner or later we have to move, and it's true that sooner or later we'd best be able to do more than sit. But it may be that we need to do that more than we do, as a way of inhabiting and training all the emotions that swirl around and course through us.

Here's another piece of encouragement I wish to offer. One of the reasons I remain so deeply attracted to the Christian faith is because of the way Jesus amends the story of Jonah. When the Pharisees demand of him a sign, a miracle, attesting to his divinity, Jesus declines to offer one. He tells them that none will be given, other than the sign of Jonah. He is referring to his death and resurrection, of course, but I've come to hear something further in those words. I've come to hear them as an affirmation that Jesus himself goes to dwell in the belly of whale, which is good news for you and me. It means that, if we can sit in that darkness, that we will soon discover that we are not alone. It means that Jesus is somehow present in the body of the great fish as well. That, for me, is the great insight of the Christian story: it's not only that we ourselves must sometimes dwell in the belly of whale, as Jonah did. It's that God, in Jesus, accompanies us there. In all the pain and wreckage, in all the discomfort and emotional distress we're seeing around us and within us, we must not neglect to see that God in Jesus has promised to dwell in it with us. We are not alone.

The last thing I wish to offer you has to do with the constructive and nurturing aspect of the belly of the whale. It's true, the belly is akin to a tomb, but that's only one side of it. It can be a protective and sheltering space as well, a womb, where creativity and dreams are born, where visions and spiritual insight are gained. What I would like to suggest is that the Meetinghouse itself, this place in which we're all gathered now, is such a space. This too is the belly of the whale. We do gather here often to confront the reality of death - we did two funerals just yesterday. But the Meetinghouse is also a protective and shielding enclosure. Think about the dome above your heads. It's there to represent the cosmos, but might it not also be a womb, or a kind of cave, or even something like the dome of a sweat lodge? Might it not be a location meant to provide moments of spiritual birth and rebirth for us all? This space, this sacred Meetinghouse, is where we willingly submerge ourselves into the deep, trusting that our own best humanity shall emerge. I believe this is a place that can become the very seat of our creativity and humanity, a maternal shelter where the old have visions, and where the young dream dreams. When you are feeling lost or overwhelmed, when you are tempted to despair or when you feel hopeless, I hope you have a renewed sense of the importance of this space. It is a space in which to recover. It is a space in which to recollect ourselves. It is a space in which, when the stormy blasts do come, we might find shelter. Every Sunday when the service is over, the Meetinghouse spits us back onto dry land in order to begin our week again. But it is always here to receive us back into its dreaming, maternal embrace.

Back to Sjon. He chose to enter the carcass of the whale. He chooses to write, symbolically speaking anyway, from the belly of the great fish. His fiction is difficult. I know of few writers who possess a voice so unique, so luminous and slant, so elusive and so challenging. That comes, I suspect, from living in the belly of the whale.

I would be proud if the same were said of us - of our theology, of our visions, of our commitments, of our very humanity - for having lived willingly in the stomach of the great fish.