



Jumping Into the Deep End
Jonah 2
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It was a hot and humid summer day at the local pool. I watched as a group of unfamiliar kids arrived. They stripped down to their bathing suits and then one after another they jumped into the deep end. One boy came to the surface, sputtering and struggling. A lifeguard jumped in and saved him. We found out later that the boy didn't know how to swim. He hadn't wanted to admit this to the other kids, so he jumped with the rest of them into the deep end.

At the second service, we are baptizing six children. Their parents are siblings and it is going to be chaotic and wonderful. If we the congregation do our part, we will have many opportunities to tell them about this God who has claimed them in baptism. We can tell them the stories of the Bible – the one about Joseph and his special coat, the one about David and his slingshot. We can tell them all about Jesus. We can share stories about how our faith has supported and challenged us. We can nurture in them a passion for justice and a concern for their fellow human beings.

But no matter how well we do our job, it's just a matter of time before at least one of them finds themselves in deep water. Maybe they will be overwhelmed and devastated by events happening out in the world. Or maybe one of their high school friends will be involved in a car accident. Perhaps they will engage in activities that are self-destructive. We cannot protect our children and youth from the difficulties of life. There is no safe haven where children can remain isolated from hard truths and tough situations.

Life is not always a walk beside the still waters. There are times when we find ourselves in the swirling, churning depths, gasping for breath, and struggling to keep our head above water.

Jonah put it this way:

**The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;**

Someday these kids will find themselves in that place. But no problem, we can just jump in and save them. Or at the very least, their parents will dive in after them. I hear they are good swimmers. It will all work out just fine. Right?

I can't tell you how many times I have received calls from concerned parents, worried about their adult children. They tell me:

They seem to have lost their way – they don't go to church – they don't appear to have a relationship with God. Could you be in touch with them?

I used to do just that. I left messages. We had short, strained conversations. Nothing ever came of it. What I do now is tell the parents: give them my contact information and then leave it up to them to reach out to me. Of course, they never do. But it's my way of saying, let your children go and trust that God is at work in their lives.

We here in the church try to pass on our faith to our children and then, when they reach adulthood, we are supposed to let them go. In matters of faith, we can pass on a few pointers, give them a few ground rules, tell them how we felt when we were first plunged under the waters. But God has no grandchildren. Each generation must find God and be found by God on its own. Luckily for these six kids, God is very persistent in claiming that which belongs to God.

Look what happens to Jonah. Jonah tries to ignore God's claim on his life. God gives him a direct assignment and Jonah takes off running in the opposite direction. But God never gives up on Jonah. At the end of the book that bears his name, Jonah still doesn't understand much. There he sits next to his withered bush, resentful of God's grace. And there is God still trying to reach Jonah – still trying to teach him about love – still insisting on claiming him.

I wonder if Jonah's parents ever knew of the extraordinary effort God made with their son.

Letting go of those we love and trusting in God's care for them – that is one approach. But there is another option. It's called holding on with an iron grip to those we love and never letting them out of our sight.

This is an appealing path for those of us who like to control things. I like to think of myself as a recovering control freak. I still have my moments, but I am nothing like how I was in my younger days. As a teenager, I never seemed to come across an organization that I didn't think could be improved by my leadership. The turning point came one evening when I was being interviewed for a year abroad program. The interviewer was looking at my application. "This is quite an impressive resume," she said. "Well, thank you," I replied with barely concealed pride. "Tell me, have you ever been involved in an organization that you didn't eventually run?"

I sputtered and hawed and I went through the list in my head and I finally answered weakly, "Well, I'm sure there is one, but I can't think of it right now."

Why settle for controlling organizations when you can control people? I've often thought, if only my friends and family would place their lives in my capable hands... And that is nothing compared to the temptation to try to control our offspring – who enter the world so helpless, dependent on us for every little thing – how on earth do we go from that to trusting in God's care for them as they head off into the world as young adults?

But the fact is that controlling things just doesn't work. I remember an incident that happened my first summer home from college. I was out at a restaurant having lunch with my mother. I was telling her all about my new independence when she stuck her finger in her water glass, leaned over, and rubbed a piece of sauce off my cheek. I suppose that I should have been grateful that she didn't use her spit, but at the time I was furious. It seemed to symbolize so much. Don't you trust me to take care of myself?

There is a larger theological question at work: can we trust God with those we love?

It is one of my favorite prayers – embedded in the funeral service – but a prayer for the living more than for the dead....

Give us such faith that in all times and in all places, we may without fear entrust those who are dear to us to your never-failing love, in this life and in the life to come.

If we have this faith, it is because of baptism. Because baptism is the sign, the symbol, the act, the reminder. In baptism we mark a child, deeper than any tattoo. With the mark of baptism, God lets the world know "This one is mine – they belongs to me - I will never give up on them."

(8:30) In about two hours, Stephen and Michelle, Kevin and Hallie, Michael and Lindsay will hand over Henry and Claire, Reese & Remy, Maya & Griffin to me, Ann and Brittany symbolically handing them over to God.

That is why baptism is not only a joyful occasion but also one that is shot through with something that is bittersweet. Parents stand there, before God and the church, saying to their child,

If we could, we would protect you for all that is hard and painful. We would calm the waters and still the seas for you – if we could. But we cannot. We cannot. So, we let go. We let go so that God has room to work, trusting that God's grace is sufficient, that God will keep the promises which God makes to you in baptism.

Because someday in the not-so-distant future we will all watch as these six kids venture forth into the deep water hoping, trusting, knowing that God's love will keep them afloat.

Give us such faith that in all times and in all places, we may without fear entrust those who are dear to us to your never-failing love, in this life and in the life to come. Amen.