

Foxhole Prayers

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

July 24, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Jonah 1:17-2:10; 3:10-4:3

Luke 16:19-31

“As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.”

You are on the gurney and about to be wheeled into surgery; or in an airplane and it begins to lose altitude--rapidly; or before a jury, rising to hear your fate; or on an island in Norway, running from the crosshairs of a murderous madman. And even though your whole life is lived in the shadow of death, when “the *ultimate*, appears on the horizon—and what problem in history does not open upon the ultimate?” asked Karl Barth--then you suddenly wake to a realization that you are “walking upon a ridge between *time* and *eternity* that is narrower than a knife-edge.” You cry to the Lord: foxhole prayers.

That realization came to Jonah in the belly of a whale—or so it seems at first glance. Moments earlier, he had been fast asleep. Oblivious to the storm hurled by God against the ship he had boarded to escape the sound of God’s voice and the imperative of God’s command, Jonah was wakened by a frantic captain, ordering him to “Get up, call on your god!” As far as I can tell, he does not. Rather, when he joins the crew on deck and is accused of causing the calamity, Jonah speaks *about* God, saying that the God he worships is the one who made the sea and the dry land, the one who is presently troubling the waters because of Jonah’s disobedience. What to do? Matter-of-factly, Jonah tells them to throw him overboard. They refuse and row all the more earnestly toward dry land, but to no avail. At their wit’s end, *they* cry to Jonah’s God, the God who stills storms, as they pitch the prophet into the sea. It is their own version of a foxhole prayer, submitting to God’s will in the face of immanent death: *Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.*

Perhaps it was in answer to their prayer--or perhaps it was in keeping with God’s original purpose--that Jonah found himself living in the providential belly of a large fish for three days and three nights, found himself in a foxhole of sorts, and so upon a ridge between *time* and *eternity* that was narrower than a knife-edge. He cries to the Lord, but something in Jonah’s prayer does not ring true. Presuming, in his first breath, that God would hear his voice and save him, Jonah next presumes God is responsible for his bad luck: *you* cast me into the deep, he prays; *your* waves and *your* billows passed over me; *you* drove me from your sight. Really? This is revisionist history at its boldest! Only when his life is ebbing away—when seaweed is wrapping itself around his head, the waters closing over him—only then does he remember the Lord, albeit in a sort of utilitarian way. Formulaic piety follows: gratitude, sacrifice, paying of vows. “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” Jonah shouts at the end. The fish vomits and, lest ancient humor be lost on a post-modern crowd, no doubt God wanted to do the same!

Not once but twice in this little story, the palpably fearful prayer of pagans, standing in the presence of the living God and asking for life in the face of death, is juxtaposed to the piously disingenuous prayer of God’s prophet, running from the

presence of the living God and choosing death in the face of the life given him by God to live. Juxtapose, as well, the prayers we say in the foxholes we inhabit, when our minds are met by the fact of our mortality.

Perhaps in these situations, you are an advanced pray-er, a true believer, a person practiced in the words that have worked throughout the ages to summon God's aid. I, myself, cling in the dark to the psalms because, left to my own devices, I am speechless. Or perhaps like the sailors, you have never really prayed to God but have, at most, wrestled invincibly with the question of whether or not the God in the Bible exists. Yet here you are with your defenses down, completely vulnerable, utterly alone except for an inexplicable and unasked for inkling that there is a Presence who hears and in whose hand your life and death might just be held. Chances are, untutored, you speak your heart, your whole heart, and trust your life and your death into the keeping of the God who, if this God is anything like Jesus, hears your cries and will deal tenderly with you.

Jonah's prayer suggests a third conversation to be had on the knife-edge between time and eternity. Even though he has been spared certain death by a providential gulp, nevertheless Jonah takes the time graciously given him to blame God for his lot. As Hebrew scholar Jonathon Magonet notes, Jonah, "offers no hint of repentance for fleeing from God. His prayer acknowledges no culpability for his present distress. He is not overcome by the waters of the sea because he has fled from God, but because you have cast me into the heart of the seas."

On the gurney, the third sort of foxhole prayer goes something like this: What have I done to deserve this? Why have you done this to me, God? These are honest cries, intent on countering vulnerability with a healthy dose of vitriol, flung God-ward, in extremis. The assumption is that God has caused your infirmity or has placed you in a life-and-death situation for reasons that either escape you or are bogus. Such foxhole prayers contain a plaintive cry: "Why have you done this to *me*?"

Though after venting, and as if to cover our bases, complaint is often followed by a heavy dose of piety, a move, according to Magonet, that is simply another way of fleeing God. "When flight from God did not work," says Magonet, "there is always flight to God, or to that convenient God who makes no demands beyond those the worshipper can comfortably offer." When he escapes this current unpleasantness, Jonah vows, in so many words to God, he plans to head to the temple in Jerusalem and live as though the word of God to go to Nineveh had been just a bad dream.

At the end of the day, the issue with foxhole prayers, assuming our cry is heard and our life is spared, the issue is whether the bargains struck or the vows made or the new relationship forged with God will have any lasting effect on however many days we have left. Sometimes we think that tragedy will convince us to live to God and for the other; or a near brush with death will make us mend our ways; or like the rich man in Jesus' parable, with a word of warning from the right person, we know we will be more mindful of what is at stake.

I am reminded of Stephen King's commencement address to graduates at Vassar a few years ago entitled "Scaring You to Action". Reflecting on his own experience of lying helpless by the side of the road in Maine after being hit by a van, King says "I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you are lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. If you find yourself in the ER with a serious injury, or if the doctor tells you yeah, that lump you felt in your breast is a tumor, you can't wave your Diners Club at it and make it go away.... We all know that life is brief, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but

extremely valuable look at life's simple backstage truths."

Like Jonah and unlike this rich man in Jesus' parable, Stephen King was given that look before he was laid in the grave. Maybe his look will convince us too. For King, rich as he is, one of those truths was this: "We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke. Warren Buffett? Going to go out broke. Bill Gates? Going to go out broke. Tom Hanks? Going to go out broke. Steve King? Broke. Not a crying dime. But how long in between coming in and going out?" King asks. "How long have you got to be in the chips? 'I'm aware of the time passin' by; they say in the end it's the blink of an eye.' That's how long."

King delivered that commencement address in 2001, two years after his accident and while he was still in the throes of a painful recovery. No telling whether the word he heard about the life he had been given to lead and had missed before his accident is still as convincing some ten years later. We all have known people who have had close calls, survived dire diagnoses, managed to rise out of the rubble of terrible tragedy with great resolve, only to return--after a few weeks or months or years--to being the same son-or-daughter-of-a-gun we knew and tolerated before the accident or diagnosis or tragedy supposedly changed them forever. Read the last two chapters of Jonah, in this regard, and consider the astonishing patience of God.

A life lived unmindful of its end, its finis, its purpose, its parameters, a life lived untouched and unturned by God's address, is a drag (literally) on the person God intends us to be. Sin is what we live in as, with Jonah, we flee from God--though it masquerades under the guise of indifference, arrogance, insensitivity, callousness, selfishness, hubris, to name a few of our more charming traits. These traits, as the old theologians said, are deadly. They land us on the other side of the grave, according to the book of Jonah and the parable of Jesus, having missed the chance to be human. One gets the sense that even in death, Jonah will still be running from God's voice and the rich man eternally will not get what he missed about the life he was given by God to live.

"My father, I beg you, send Lazarus to my father's house that he may warn them, so that they will not come into the place of torment," prayed Dives from his eternal foxhole. Hearing the words we have heard this morning, Schweitzer reordered his life in response to God's claim upon his days. In Bonhoeffer's words, Schweitzer simply obeyed, took the first step, followed.

Pray, then, in the foxhole where you now crouch, for the hard grace of God's voice summoning you, clean contrary to your desire, at any moment, toward a road where a stranger will meet you—like one raised from the dead. If this should happen, invite him to your table. Do not leave him to beg again outside your gate. For in the breaking of bread, you will recognize the human being God intended you to be from the beginning and I promise you, your foxhole prayer will be answered, and you will live!